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June, 1984 \$1.75

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



Rags and Stones

by Louis Weinstein

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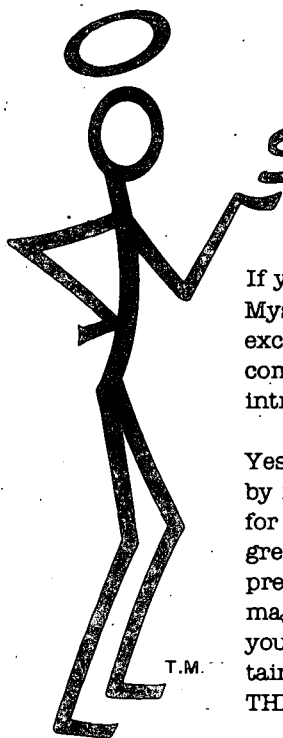
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CANADIAN EDITION ISBN 812-50-280-9 \$4.50

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 29, No. 6, June, 1984. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at \$1.75 per copy January-December issues, \$1.95 special mid-December issue. Annual subscription \$19.50 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$23.00 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1932, Marion, O. 43305. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. © 1984 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Form 3579 to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 1932, Marion, Ohio 43305. In Canada return to 628 Monmouth Rd., Windsor, Ontario N8Y3L1. **ISSN: 0002-5224.**

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Beware—we're warning you right now—of this month's Mystery Classic by Thomas Burke, author of the perhaps more famous Jack the Ripper tale called "The Hands of Mr. Ottermole." Because the latter has been often anthologized, we elected instead to bring you "Johnson Looked Back," strangely enough about a man with *no* hands, and it is one of the scariest stories we've read in a long time.

Speaking of scary matters . . . mystery weekends seem to be proliferating around the country. We have reported before on the one held at Mohonk Mountain House, which always takes place on or around the Ides of March—and we will do so again in the next issue. In the meantime, Murder To Go, sponsors of the Mystery Express train trips, has planned a series of events for the year. On April 6th, in Baltimore,

"The Star-Spangled Mystery" will take place, a whodunit weekend involving the auctioning of the mysterious *second* Star-Spangled Banner, but this event is nearly booked. Call David Landau at 301-467-7102 for a reservation, should they still be available. (Our apologies that, because of newsstand sale dates, only our subscribers will have a chance at this.)

Later events include several "Captain Morgan Mystery Weekends," co-sponsored by Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum; for \$275 you can be part of a "weekend of treasure hunting and murder," involving clues drawn from a map and a poem. The first two are April 13th in Cape May, New Jersey, and May 18th in Castine, Maine. For information, write to David Landau at Murder To Go, 225 Varick Street, Suite 622, New York, New York 10012 (or to be put on the group's mailing list).

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FICTION

VIGILANTE LAW

by Dick Stodghill



The pale October sun smiles warmly on the flatlands of Indiana, but the thoughts swirling through my mind lack even the hint of warmth. Instead there is a cold fury directed at Jake Richards.

I turn from the window where I have been standing, looking

out but seeing nothing. "Jake," I say to him, "you know how I feel about this sort of thing. I don't appreciate being told what to put in my column. Anyway, I'm a week ahead and have enough material for another, maybe longer."

Without warning Jake slaps

Illustration by George Thompson

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his palm flat against the top of the city desk. "Get off your high-horse, Hal. How often does anybody tell you what to write? Never, and you know it."

He studies me smugly from eyes red-rimmed by the day's quota of cigarette smoke drifting up from both his mouth and the ashtray that overflows onto the desk. He is right, and knowing it only adds to my annoyance.

"But this is different," he continues. "It's perfect material for 'Around Town with Hal Blinn.'" He pauses again, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "Besides, I don't know what else to do with it."

He has touched a match to a short fuse. Of course Jake intended it that way. "Fine," I cry, "just fine. You don't know what to do with it because it's not material for a real story so you dump it off on good ol' Hal—let him bore people with it. Right, Jake, am I right?"

He doesn't answer, just sits looking up at me, grinning, so I say, "Anyway, it was an accident. Granger brought out every sordid detail in his story, so what more is there to say?"

Jake straightens up from his slouch, hackles raised. "What more is there to say?" he growls from deep in his throat. "Some poor S.O.B. walks in off the street to buy a tube of toothpaste and gets gunned down by this wild-eyed shopkeeper and

you ask what more there is to say?"

"For Pete's sake, Jake, be reasonable. It was unintentional, he was shooting at a holdup man. Those things happen, but it doesn't mean the vigilantes have taken over the town."

Jake abruptly swivels his chair and begins reading copy on a video display terminal. "Do the column, Hal. Just do it."

After reading Steve Granger's story of the incident a second time, then tracking him through half the taverns in Midland to ask a few questions, I find I know nothing more than I did at the start. The victim, Okla T. Lenfestey, was a resident of Flintville, Tennessee. So far his reason for being in Midland has not been established, aside from the fact that Flintville sends half its native sons here to work in the factories. But Lenfestey was forty-three, operated a one-man television repair shop in Flintville, and not a factory in town is hiring. He wasn't job hunting in Midland.

Shortly after eight in the evening, he entered a store on the south side of town, a convenience store of sorts owned by a Kurt Sideris. According to Sideris, he was alone in the store when Lenfestey entered and

began looking at a display of toilet articles just to the right of the counter. Within a matter of seconds a young black male followed Lenfestey into the store, walked to the counter, and pulled a gun from under his jacket.

Sideris, who had been robbed several times before, reached under the counter and came up with a gun of his own, a snub-nosed .38 revolver, loaded and cocked. The bandit, Sideris told police, slapped the gun Sideris was pointing at him, and it went off. The bullet struck Lenfestey in the chest, killing him instantly.

At that point the bandit fired at Sideris but was wide of the mark, and the bullet lodged in a wall stud behind the counter. Sideris then shot him between the eyes.

The dead bandit was DeWon Mitchem, a twenty-year-old native of Midland who lived six blocks from the small store on South Madison, a street which at that point is the dividing line between black and white neighborhoods. Mitchem had no police record, worked part time for the Midland Community Action Agency, and was a student at Indiana Vocational Technical College, a trade school better known as Ivy Tech.

It surprises me to find the store open and Sideris behind the counter only twenty-one

hours after the shooting. I guess his age to be forty as he studies me with disfavor from narrowed gray eyes above high cheekbones, a hook nose, and thin lips that barely move as he says, "I've already told the police and reporters everything there is to tell."

I nod understandingly. "I'm sure it's been an ordeal for you." I turn a little and look around the store for a moment. More to myself than Sideris I murmur, "Why do you suppose Lenfestey stopped here?"

"The same reason anyone else does. He needed something."

"But apparently he just arrived in town. At least the police haven't found a hotel where he was registered, and if he was staying with anyone, they haven't let it be known."

Sideris lays aside the tool he has been using to stamp prices on the tops of cans. "What are you driving at?"

"Nothing, just wondering. Funny how things work out, isn't it? All the places he could have stopped, but at just the wrong moment he walks in here for the first time and . . . it was the first time, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"But I suppose the place gets crowded sometimes, so you can't be sure."

"I'm sure. It was the first time he was here."

"Then you had never seen him before?"

Sideris makes an impatient sound, shaking his head as he does so.

"How about the gunman—Mitchell, was that his name?"

"Mitchem. No, I never saw him before, either."

"That's strange, he only lived a few blocks away."

Sideris looks at me as he might look at a child asking stupid questions. "Would you expect him to try to hold up a place where he was known?"

I grin sheepishly, say, "Guess you're right," then hand him a quarter and nickel for a roll of mints before heading for the door.

The white residents of the section of Midland known as Industry began their exodus shortly after the Second World War. It was completed in a few blinks of the eye. One by one in the years that followed, the factories bordering the neighborhood shut their doors until now only empty shells remain as a reminder of more prosperous times. DeWon Mitchem lived in the heart of Industry on South Hackley, a street of substantial old homes shaded by tall oaks, maples, and sycamores.

I drive slowly past the Mitchem house without stopping, then turn back to Madison where a small building that is mostly gymnasium serves as a community center. There is

laughter and shouting in the gym as half a dozen young men wearing "Each One Teach One" T-shirts instruct small boys on the fundamentals of basketball.

Several of the men nod or wave a hand in greeting and one—slim, rangy, and older than the others—walks over to the doorway where I stand watching. Along the way he picks up a towel draped over the back of a folding chair, wipes his face and hands, then extends his right one. I greet him by his Muslim name, thinking back for an instant to the time when as Harry Evans he led Midland Central to a state championship. Seven thousand people crowded into the high school fieldhouse for home games then, cheering his every move. Today few recognize him on the street. Most of those who do look on him as a problem rather than seeing him for what he is, an important part of the solution.

He leads me into a small office. We sit down and I ask him about DeWon Mitchem. For a moment he lowers his head, shaking it slowly. His eyes glisten when he looks at me again and says, "No matter what the police say or what the newspapers say, DeWon Mitchem wasn't a holdup man. Not DeWon, and no matter how much wind they blow uptown, they can't make him one."

"What about the gun?"

He laughs tersely, without

humor. "Ask anybody, ask any brother on the street if ever, even once, DeWon Mitchem so much as touched a gun. I mean ever, man. Not because he was black—you know me well enough to know I'm not saying it just because he was black—but that was the best-hearted, most gentle man you're going to find in this town."

If I didn't believe what he tells me, I wouldn't be talking to him. We both know that, but he hasn't told me what I expected to hear, so I'm confused. For a moment we sit quietly, then he says, "I don't know what happened. I wish I did because some of the brothers are upset and I don't know what to tell them. But I know one thing for sure, DeWon Mitchem wasn't carrying when he walked in that store last night."

On impulse, rather than returning uptown, I drive west past rows of gray, two story buildings—Midlandia Homes to most people but "the project" to those who live there. Half a dozen men stand arguing in front of a tavern at "the low end," a ramshackle part of town carefully avoided by most white Midlanders. When I pull to the curb, the hot exchange of words and gestures ends. All eyes turn to me, fury still flashing in some but quickly giving way to curiosity.

Two of the men recognize me.

One laughs and says, "Blinn—wha'd'ya doin' down here?"

"Just asking around. Know DeWon Mitchem, Eddie?"

An angry murmuring, most of it unintelligible, is followed by a longer silence than I care for. At last it is broken by someone saying, "Why you wanna know, bright skin?"

Eddie grabs the speaker's arm and says, "Hey, man, watch your mouth. This's my friend."

Quickly, before another argument can start, I say, "I hear DeWon wasn't a man with a gun."

There is a louder exchange among them, then Eddie says, "You better believe it, my man."

"He was what you might call upright," a slender man I don't know says in the cultured tones of a West Indian.

Isiah Racker, the second of my acquaintances, crouches so his face is level with mine and no more than eighteen inches away. "They're right, Hal. I knowed DeWon since he was a babe, and his daddy and momma 'fore then. Don't you believe what they're saying uptown."

It is after eight when I finish checking the files in the newspaper library. There is none for either Sideris or Mitchem, which comes as no surprise. It does, though, to find Grady Driscoll working at his desk when I walk into the newsroom. He tells me the jury has

just reached a verdict in a rape trial he has been covering. He is writing the story so it won't be waiting for him at seven in the morning.

While he finishes it, I stand at a window overlooking an empty street, mulling over what I have heard. Then we walk the two short blocks to the Delaware Hotel and exchange stories of the day's events at a table in the dining room. He is amused when I say Jake is growing more autocratic by the day, but listens skeptically as I tell him what I have heard about DeWon Mitchem.

"Sure you aren't getting fed a line, Hal?" he asks when I finish.

"It's not a line. That's not saying they couldn't be wrong."

He pushes his chair back and stands up, patting the rubber tire that causes his shirt to gap above his belt. "Let's walk across the street, see if Staley's in his office. Maybe there's some new developments."

I follow him, but without enthusiasm. Greg Staley looks up from his desk as we enter the dingy detective's room in the police station at City Hall. His shirtsleeves are rolled just below the elbows, and his tie hangs loosely below an unfastened collar. He slides the papers he has been studying into a file folder, yawns, and checks his watch.

"Break time," says Driscoll.

"Break, hell," Staley mumbles, "I'm heading home." His thin features are drawn, fatigue has glazed his eyes.

Driscoll nods in the direction of the hotel. "Have a drink on the way."

Staley takes his jacket from the back of his chair and slips into it without bothering to unroll his shirtsleeves. He says, "Just one and that's it."

As we talk quietly at a table in a dark corner of the hotel lounge, it gradually comes across that Staley is far from satisfied with the case. The chief is satisfied, however, and wants him to wrap up the loose ends as quickly and cheaply as possible. Staley won't be specific about what it is that bothers him, and even Driscoll can't get him to theorize on what might have occurred if the story told by Sideris was off the mark.

Finally he grows weary of Driscoll's pestering and says, "Look, you people can speculate all you want. I have to go by facts, by solid evidence and information."

"But you have theories, don't you?" Driscoll counters.

Staley looks at me and sighs. "What I'd like to do is go down to Flintville, but the chief nixed the idea."

"Why Flintville?" I ask him.

"You know, don't you, that Mrs. Sideris is from there?"

"No, I didn't know. That wasn't in the newspapers."

"We just found it out this afternoon. I've checked down there by phone and the Flintville police don't know of any connection between her and Lenfestey, but they told me about another accidental killing he was involved in. A year ago he thought there was a prowler in the house and took a shot at him, but it turned out to be his own wife. She was killed."

Driscoll whistles softly. "Now that's *some* coincidence."

I tilt back in my chair, think about it a moment, then say, "Almost too much of one. Two accidental shootings, the man with the gun in one, the victim in the other."

Staley stares into his empty glass, then pushes it aside, arching his eyebrows. "Things like that happen. The chief thinks so, anyway, but I'd like to go down and check it out myself."

Driscoll turns to me and says, "Let's do it for him."

I study him over the rim of my glass, wondering if he's serious. He is, I decide, but it's a good time, not work, that he has in mind. I shake my head and say, "For God's sake, Grady, you don't think the *News-Banner* is going to be any more willing to pay for a trip to Tennessee than the City of Midland, do you?"

"We've both got vacation time left."

"And I intend to spend mine with both feet propped up on the end of the couch. I *am* going to talk to Mrs. Sideris in the morning but that'll be it."

Sideris is stacking canned goods near the front of the store when I drive by shortly after nine in the morning. I continue south to Twelfth Street, then turn east and go more than a mile before coming to a 1920's bungalow that is the Sideris residence.

Fern Sideris, wearing a frayed and faded housecoat, hair up in rollers, looks older than her husband. Like him, she is thin, but in her case it borders on emaciation. When I have explained my reason for being on her porch, she invites me into a small living room so clean it looks unlivd in. I settle on the edge of a chair, and she brings coffee.

After a few preliminaries I say, "They tell me you're from Flintville."

She nods her head, then sips coffee.

"But you didn't know Okla Lenfestey?"

"I didn't know none of the Lenfesteys. They lived a little outside town, I think." She talks in a monotone, and it comes across that her life probably matches her voice.

"Then you didn't know Lenfestey's wife?" She shakes her head, so I say, "Did you know

he accidentally shot and killed her a year ago?"

"No, I didn't know about that." The news doesn't jar her from the lethargic frame of mind, which apparently is a constant thing.

"Where did you meet your husband?" I ask her.

"Down there. He stayed at the hotel where I worked, so we got to know each other."

"How'd he happen to be in Flintville?"

"Business. He was just out of the army and was selling . . . let's see, it was some kind of hardware supplies. It didn't work out, and after we got back here—I mean back to Indianapolis, where he was from—he went to work for a supermarket."

"You came back with him?"

Her cheeks flush slightly. "We got married while he was in Flintville."

I decide not to press it further, sensing it is a sensitive subject that might make her withdraw completely. "That would have been about when?" I ask.

"Let's see, 1969. It was July and Mr. Sideris had only been back from Vietnam two weeks."

"Found a job pretty fast, didn't he?"

"Mr. Sideris has never been one to lay around much."

Calling him mister as she does makes her sound like the wife of an educator. It could be

a habit of Flintville women, but I have never noticed it in others from there. I set my empty cup on a tray she has placed near me, then stand up. "I understand your husband didn't meet Okla Lenfestey while he was in Flintville."

She gets up, too, running her hands along the sides of her housecoat. "Oh, no, the Lenfesteys weren't in the hardware business."

As I walk to the car I wonder if Mr. Sideris was.

Driscoll watches me expectantly when I walk in the newsroom. I light a cigarette and then sink down in my chair, ignoring him while I contemplate my next move, if there is to be one. After a moment or two I grind the cigarette in an ashtray and go over to him. "Okay, how soon can you go?"

"Right now. I'm clear."

We approach the city desk together. Jake looks up, sensing a conspiracy, then goes into one of his coughing spells when I say, "Jake, we're going on vacation."

When the cough is under control he says, "Now wait a minute, you two, you can't just walk over here and say you're going on vacation, you know that."

"We've got it coming," I reply. "I'm a few columns ahead so you won't run out."

"And now that the trial is over, there won't be anything

doing in the courts for a few days," Driscoll tells him.

Jake grins unexpectedly. "What're you up to now?"

"We're driving down to Tennessee—Flintville—to check out a few things about those shootings at the convenience store. You told me to do a column on it, remember?"

"And you're not asking the company to send you?"

"No."

"Or expenses or anything?"

"No."

He shakes his head, bewildered. "Okay, if you're crazy enough to spend your own money, be my guest. Jeez, I'd think you'd at least have asked."

"Well how about it, then?"

He makes a snorting noise. "Forget it. Have a nice vacation."

Driscoll naps as we travel south on Interstate 65. It is our second trip to Flintville, and on the last one Driscoll pulled a disappearing act. I glance at him suspiciously as he sleeps open-mouthed, wondering where he spent his time and if he intends to vanish again. Probably, I decide, thinking it explains why he was so eager to return.

We arrive an hour after dark. Nothing has changed in fifteen months, not even the characters who appraise us from a bench in front of the only hotel in town. The man behind the

desk remembers us, even gives us the same room with twin beds.

Then we walk down the street to the same restaurant we had eaten at before and are served by the same waitress, a skinny, hard-bitten woman with a chalk-on-blackboard voice.

"Hey," she says, "I remember you two. From up in Midland, ain't'cha?"

"You called it," Driscoll replies. "Man from here was killed up there the other night. Did you know him, Okla Lenfestey?"

"Sure I knowed him, everybody did. It was in the paper about him. Seems like somebody from Flintville's always gettin' killed up there. Must be some town. I keep tellin' my brother he oughta come back."

"Trouble happens everywhere," I say to her. "We heard Lenfestey had some of his own right here not long ago."

She purses her lips, nodding. "Yeah, that was too bad. Just one of those things, I guess. She was a nice lady, all things considered, and Okla was all broke up over what happened."

"Like what things considered?" I ask.

"Well, her bein' from up north and all. I'll give her credit, she fit in better'n most."

"Where up north was she from?"

"Don't rightly recall. Now what'll you fellas have?"

Just as I anticipated, after breakfast in the morning Driscoll tells me he has a few things to do and heads off somewhere by himself. It dawns on me that being in Flintville with him could be dangerous if he has met a woman with attachments. In hill towns, discovery means cutting or shooting.

The morning sun quickly warms the crisp air; the hills guarding Flintville from the outside world are adorned in their autumn finery. Reluctantly I leave the outdoors for the dank corridors of the courthouse, an ornate old building that looks better outside than in. The first item on my list is to learn the maiden name of Mrs. Sideris, something I neglected to ask her. Knowing the month and year of her marriage simplifies the task, and within minutes I learn she was Elizabeth Fern Keeney and, as I suspected, is six years older than her husband.

The sheriff's office is in a separate building on the courthouse square, a decrepit, two story brick structure that also contains his living quarters and the jail. I find Arlo Crockett going over the previous night's reports in his narrow private office that was once a front porch. A muscular man about six inches above six feet, wearing khaki pants and a sport shirt of burnt orange, he has a

brusque air of competency.

After I remind him that we met several years earlier when he testified at a trial in Midland, we spend a few minutes talking generalities before I ask if it was his department that investigated the death of Mrs. Lenfestey.

"We did—they lived a mile south of the city limit."

"Was there any doubt about its being an accident?"

"Of course. There always is when there are no witnesses to a killing. He was tried, but it took the jury only eleven minutes to acquit him. Can't say I disagreed with their decision."

"Then you think it was an accident?"

"There was nothing in the way of evidence to indicate otherwise, not even the usual stories that they hadn't been getting on. There had been a rash of break-ins prior to that and people were edgy at the time. Lenfestey was awakened by a noise in another room, so he picked up a gun he kept under the bed and went to investigate. When he got to the door of the other room, a figure was outlined against the window, so he fired."

"He hadn't checked to see if his wife was in bed, and he didn't call out before he shot?"

"Negative to both. They slept in twin beds, and he assumed she was in hers. Trigger happy, a damn fool trick in my opinion,

but unintentional as far as we could learn."

"Ever find out why she was standing at a window in another room?"

"No," Crockett says with a shake of his head. "Who was there to ask?"

"Did you know them well?"

"I didn't know her at all. I knew him to speak to."

"What was her first name? And I understand she was from up north, do you know where?"

"Her first name was Ruth." He gets up from his swivel chair with the quickness of a mountain cat. "Come on, I'll check the other."

I follow him to another, more formal office and wait near the door while he gets a folder from a file cabinet. He flips through pages, reads to himself for a moment, then looks up and says, "Ruth Ann Lenfestey, thirty-seven. Maiden name Williams. Born Indianapolis, Indiana."

As he walks with me to the outside door, I ask Crockett if he knew Fern Sideris. He shakes his head, then says, "If I was investigating Lenfestey's death in Midland, there are a lot of coincidences I'd want explained."

The Flintville phone book, little more than a quarter inch thick, reveals only one Keeney. A woman with a tired voice answers when I dial the number.

Yes, she tells me, Ken Keeney is her husband and the brother of Fern Sideris. I can find him at work at the lumber company just south of town.

He is pointed out to me, and I walk through the yard to where he is working between high stacks of lumber. He looks up, scowling, then extends his hand, thinking I am a customer with an order form to fill. When I introduce myself, his scowl deepens, and in a monotone similar to his sister's, he says, "So wha'd'ya want with me?"

"Just thought I'd look you up while I was in town. Ever get up to Midland to see your sister?"

He shakes his narrow head, then brushes back strands of brown hair cut with long sideburns in the style of the hills. "Just once. Never hit it off much with him." He gives a curt laugh, then says, "He never brung her back once since they got married up. She even come alone when Momma died, and Daddy, too."

"From what I understand, they got married kind of sudden, didn't they?"

His eyes narrow around the scowl. "That's been a long time now. No point draggin' up old trouble."

"There was trouble?"

"Look, mister," he says turning away, "I got work to do."

I find Iva Delroy, sister of

Okla Lenfestey, at home in a big, unpainted, Victorian-style house two blocks from downtown. I had gotten her name from the *News-Banner* story on her brother's death and her address from the phone book.

She admits me hesitantly, and I follow her into a musty room crowded with furniture dating back to the early years of the century. Faded blue drapes are closed to the sunshine, and what little light there is comes from a forty-watt bulb in a table lamp with a stained-glass shade. She waves me to a massive rocker with overstuffed arms that, when I sink down a little tentatively, rise nearly to my shoulders.

She settles on a matching couch across the room, patting lifeless hair pulled back and knotted behind her head. There is a frail look about her, probably from lack of fresh air, and I estimate her age at fifty, give or take a few years. After expressing my condolences, which she accepts without comment or change of expression, I ask if she knows why her brother traveled to Midland.

"Said he had somethin' to attend to up there, that was all. I think he got a letter, but it wasn't out to his place when I looked yesterday so maybe he took it along with him."

"Had he ever been to Midland before?"

"Not that I know about."

"Did he know anybody there?"

"Naturally he did. Everybody in Flintville does, but nobody close to him."

"His wife was from up that way, I understand."

She shakes her head, correcting me. "Not Midland, it was Indianapolis. That's some distance away, isn't it?"

"About sixty miles. How did they happen to meet?"

"Okie was in the army up to Fort Harrison in Indianapolis and met her in town." She laughs softly, reminiscing. "He was a real operator with the ladies back then, Okie was. Could have had his pick of about any in town, but he didn't want to tie himself down to just one. Then he went off to the army and come back a few years later with a wife. Pretty little thing, too, and just as sweet as could be."

For a few seconds we sit silently, then she says, "Here now, I'm forgettin' my manners. Let me get you some coffee."

I welcome the chance to think for a moment without interruption. When she comes back with a tray, I take a cookie, mushy stale, and then the cup she has filled with rancid coffee. When she is on the couch again I say, "Did your sister-in-law—Ruth, wasn't it?—have many visitors from Indianapolis? Family or friends?"

"A few, right at the begin-

ning. Then her parents died about a year apart, and after that I think her brother come down just once, and that was years ago. That's all she had, one brother."

"What was his name?"

She studies on it a moment, then says, "Chris, I think it was. He was kind of a strange one, if you ask me. Didn't even come for her funeral 'cause Okie didn't know how to get in touch with him."

"Did any friends ever visit her here?"

"Not that I heard about." She pauses to sip from her cup. "If any had, I would of heard."

"When was your brother at Fort Harrison?"

"Well, he got out during the summer of '68 and had been there a little better'n a year."

"Did he serve in Vietnam?"

"Never left the States. He worked in electronics, that's how he come to go into TV repair."

"And he and Ruth never had children?"

Her body stiffens, shock clouds her face. "Oh, yes. You never heard about that? Two boys, the sweetest you ever seen." She hesitates, her features contorting. "They was walking along the highway south of town—it was in '77 when one was seven and the other eight—and was killed by a hit-and-runner."

For a moment we sit without speaking as she sags back on

the couch, head shaking slowly. Then I say, "Did they ever catch the driver?"

"Not to this day. It just tore Okie and Ruth all up. She 'always was a quiet soul, but after that the life just seemed to drain right out of her."

I set my cup aside and stand up, wondering just how much tragedy can be heaped upon one family. I thank her, then at the door turn and say, "Did you know Fern Sideris when she lived here? She was Fern Keeney at the time."

"By sight, that's all."

"How about the man she married, Kurt Sideris?"

Her head shakes again. "He wasn't from these parts."

The last thing I expect to find when I return to the hotel is Driscoll sitting on the bench out front. He gets up, saying a goodbye to the three regulars as if they are old friends, then turns to me, frowning. "Where've you been all this time?"

I say, "Around," and start walking toward the restaurant. Driscoll falls into step beside me. "I went down to the drug-store for some blades and smokes," he complains, "and when I get back you're nowhere to be found."

"You mean you've been sitting on that bench all morning?"

"So what else is there to do

in Flintville? What did you turn up, anything?"

I contemplate him suspiciously; but fill him in after we're seated at a table next to the window. He listens without comment, then says, "Did you hear about the shotgun wedding?"

"What shotgun wedding?"

"Kurt Sideris and Fern Keeney. The old man next to me back there told me all about it. Would you believe he's nailed down that seat for thirty years? Except in bad weather; then the boys move into the lobby."

"Get to the point, Grady."

His lips curl in a biting grin. He is determined to make me pay one way or another for going off without him. "You never have time for an old fellow like that, do you? All you ever care about are your own selfish interests, right?"

I sigh resignedly, stare out at the street a second or two, then turn to him again. "Okay, Grady, I lack your feeling and compassion. Now about this wedding . . ."

"Well, the old man knew Fern Keeney because she had been chambermaid at the hotel for years. A real frigid piece of cake, he called her. Thought every man that came along had designs on her body, but the truth was she never had a date in her life. The joke among the fellows around town, what they called her behind her back was

Blowtorch because it would have taken one to thaw her out enough so she'd even say hello."

"Very funny. She's no beauty, grant you, but—"

"Knock it off, Hal. Anyway, the old man remembers Sideris because he stayed four nights at the hotel, which comes close to being a record."

"Four nights? How many hardware stores did Flintville have back then?"

Driscoll laughs scoffingly. "He wasn't selling hardware or anything else. The old man says he never could find out what Sideris was up to, but it wasn't anything good. For a while he thought Sideris was an outlaw casing the bank or something like that, but decided he was just spying around for some reason, as things turned out."

"Now we're coming to the good part, right?"

He pretends not to hear. "One day Sideris was out drinking early and came back to the hotel about noon, feeling no pain. So pretty soon Fern goes in to make up his room, not realizing he's there, and he must have made a grab for her. She screams just once, so the desk clerk—not the one there now, an old guy who didn't move too fast—went upstairs to see what was going on, and the other old fellow, the one I was talking to, followed along. They didn't set any speed records getting there, but even so nothing much had happened

except Fern apparently had changed her mind because she had just removed the last of her clothes. When they opened the door she really started screaming—so loud that Sideris, who was halfway passed out on the bed, raised up a little and asked what was going on.

"Fern put her clothes back on, yelling all the while because the old guys are standing there grinning. By the time she finished, a crowd had gathered, and she went running out of the place.

"An hour or so later, her father and brother arrive and go up to the room where Sideris is sleeping it off. They grab him and drag him out, with him still too drunk to know what's going on, let alone resist. When he comes back that night, Fern's with him and they're married."

I sit silently, letting it soak in. Finally I say, "What about a waiting period?"

Driscoll laughs derisively. "Hal, you think of the craziest things. Under the circumstances I don't imagine the father and brother had much trouble getting it waived, if they even bothered. What difference does it make?"

"None," I concede. After a few minutes spent concentrating on rubbery hamburgers I say, "I think we've done all we can here. What we have to do, we have to go to Indianapolis. If we're going to find an answer,

if there's even one to find, it's going to come there. That's the only thing I can see that Sideris, Lenfestey, and Ruth Williams have in common — Indianapolis."

Driscoll swallows his last french fry, washes it down with coffee, then says, "Let's go."

Clouds roll in from the west as we retrace our route along a narrow highway that twists around and over the Tennessee and Kentucky hills. The temperature drops, and a chill autumn rain begins soon after we reach the interstate at Glasgow. I switch on the heater as we cross the Ohio River at Louisville. Dusk falls an hour ahead of schedule, and when the rain becomes mixed with snow, I pull off at Franklin. We check into a motel beside the interstate, then pass the gloomy evening in the lounge, reviewing what we have learned, speculating on whether any of it will eventually make sense.

Frost sparkles in cold sunlight when we leave in the morning, but the snow hasn't stuck to the ground or pavement. In less than an hour we stop at a branch library on the south side of Indianapolis, where Driscoll jots down names and addresses as I read them from old city directories. Twenty minutes later we are headed north on Meridian Street to-

ward the neighborhood bordering Pendleton Pike where, fifteen years ago, the Sideris and Williams families lived only nine blocks apart. The main gate at Fort Benjamin Harrison is a short distance away.

The house where Kurt Sideris grew up stands among others just like it in one of those projects that mushroomed everywhere after the Second World War. A home to call their own for everyone; that was the goal, and it didn't matter how many were crowded together on minuscule lots, how cramped they might be inside, or that those called ranch-style resembled nothing ever seen on a ranch. The project is in a bedroom community adjoining Indianapolis, but a stranger would never realize he had passed from one to the other unless he noticed the city limit signs.

The young woman who answers our knock at what had been the Sideris home has lived there only three years and knows nothing about the family. She directs us to a house three doors south on the other side of the street, where an elderly woman greets us with the eager cordiality extended by the lonely. She tells us that of course she remembers the Sideris family because like her and her late husband, Mae and Fritz Sideris moved in when the houses were new.

"But they've been gone for

years now," she says, "and we haven't kept in touch. They moved to Florida—Venice, I think it was—and for a few years we exchanged Christmas cards, you know how you do. I'm ashamed to say it, but I don't even know if they're still alive."

"They had a son, didn't they?" I ask.

Her face lights up again. "Yes, just the one, Kurt. He was the jolliest little boy you ever saw, and he stayed that way, too, even through high school when some turn unpleasant. Kurt, he always had a smile on his face and a pleasant word for everybody. A sunny disposition no matter what, and a hard-working boy, too. Always shoveling snow or mowing lawns or whatever he could to earn money. And he delivered the *Star* in the morning for years—the best paperboy we ever had. The one we have now, why you never know if he's going to come at all, and when he does he's always late."

"Kurt didn't move south with his parents, did he?"

"Oh, no, he was grown and married before they left. He had been in Vietnam, you know. It was so sad, how he had changed when he came back."

"In what way?"

"Just about every way you could think of. He was still polite, of course, but gloomy and not wanting to be around people. You would of thought he

forgot how to smile while he was away. It hurt Mae and Fritz, believe me. Kurt couldn't help it, I'm sure, but he was there a long time in the infantry and must have had some terrible experiences because he just wasn't the same boy at all."

"You haven't kept in touch with him, either?" Driscoll asks her, even though we both know what her answer will be.

"No, he didn't stay at home long after he got back. Just a few weeks later he got married, which was another shock for Mae and Fritz because they didn't know about it until it was over and they didn't know the girl at all. She wasn't from around here, I remember that. For a while they had an apartment in town but would hardly ever visit his folks. Then they moved away someplace—Kokomo or Marion, one of those towns up north, I think. Soon after that Mae and Fritz went to Florida so I never did see Kurt again."

"Did you know a girl about Kurt's age named Ruth Ann Williams?" I ask her. She thinks a moment, then shakes her head.

When we are back in the car Driscoll tells me to stop for coffee. He also had bad experiences in Vietnam, but managed to adjust well to civilian life once he returned. The story has bothered him, though, and for some time he sits quietly star-

ing out the window of a fast food dining room. Finally, without looking at me, he says, "I knew some people who had that happen. Still do know some, I guess."

He is silent again for a few minutes, then finishes his coffee, grins at me, and says, "We'd better be moving along, buddy. Know where that street is that Ruth Ann Williams lived on?"

We find it in an older development built when the town was a little distance from the city and had an identity of its own. Ruth Williams lived on a pleasant street of two story houses under tall trees. The city directories had told us her father was an accountant with an insurance company based in Indianapolis and that her brother was attending Butler University while she was in high school.

We have a difficult time finding anyone who remembers the family and end up going house to house knocking on doors. Eventually we find another elderly woman halfway down the next block who was a friend of Caroline Williams, the mother. She repeats what we learned in Flintville, that Mrs. Williams outlived her husband by only nine or ten months and that both have been dead more than a decade.

Ruth had been a pleasant, pretty girl, she recalls, but the brother comes across as another type altogether. Ob-

viously the woman was not taken with Christopher Williams, who as a boy apparently was the exact opposite of Kurt Sideris—taciturn, arbitrary, lazy. Her nose seems to turn up as she tells us that to her, for one, it came as no surprise when he became a hippie while in college. "Long-haired, filthy, and foul-mouthed," are the words she chooses to describe him.

"Oh, but you should have seen him after his parents died and he had a little money," she says. "By then the hippie phase was fading, so overnight he turned into a three-piece-suit man and somebody was always telling me about seeing him in a fancy restaurant or going into one of those cocktail lounges."

"Whatever became of him?" I ask.

"He had a good job with his father's old company. Sold insurance, he did, and from what I hear, did well at it, but then decided to open his own agency out in some small town—Rushville, I think. Underneath, though, I'm sure he never changed."

"Of course you know about Ruth," I say.

"Yes, just one terrible tragedy after another." She sounds almost pleased in saying it, as if tragedy is just fine so long as it is somebody else's. "Of course you can expect things like that when you marry a soldier."

"How did she meet Okla Lenfestey, do you know?"

"Isn't that a terrible name, Okla Lenfestey? So, so . . . oh, you know what I mean. Anyway, she met him at a dance somewhere, and after that he was always hanging around the Williams house, mooching meals and God knows what else."

"I take it you didn't care for him?"

"I never laid eyes on him, thank goodness."

"How about a boy named Kurt Sideris, did you know him?"

She looks up, closing her eyes and repeating, "Sideris, Sideris." When I've had about all of it I can take, she opens her eyes again and says, "No, I never heard the name before."

As we walk down the driveway Driscoll says, "Whee-ouu. A nice sweet old lady, huh?"

I laugh, then tell him to watch for a phone booth. We stop at the first one; I dial Rushville information and ask for the number of the Christopher Williams residence and insurance agency. A curt voice snaps out both. Driscoll watches as I write them down, then we look at each other. Without saying anything we return to the car, head south on the interstate to U.S. 52, then southeast toward Rushville.

The drive takes less than an hour, but it is past noon when

we arrive. Rushville is a typical Hoosier county seat, a picture-postcard town of large, well-maintained residences fanning out in three directions from an old fortress of a courthouse that stands imperiously on a downtown square. Most businesses close on Wednesday afternoon, and only a few storerooms stand empty. Change is accepted reluctantly in Rushville, and individuality takes a back seat to conformity.

We discuss our approach to Christopher Williams over lunch at a small but busy restaurant on a downtown corner. The result is a mental list of several points we would like cleared up for our own satisfaction but only one question that truly matters. Both of us, I think, know the answer, yet want to hear it spoken.

Christopher Williams' insurance agency occupies a new brick building where two highways part company at the south end of town. A receptionist, long of tooth and suspicious of eye, sizes us up as poor risks, then says, "I'll see if Mr. Williams is in." After a brief phone call she motions with her head toward a hallway and says, "Last door on the right."

Williams has left his desk to greet us at the door on the off chance we may be customers. The vest of his three-piece gray suit bulges a little at the waistline. His hair is thin on top and

his eyes are calculating, but he greets us like a true salesman. Any trace of the hippie youth has long since vanished. That other lifestyle, I decide, was quickly discarded and forgotten once it ceased to be convenient.

His eyebrows lift when I tell him we are checking out the circumstances surrounding the death of his brother-in-law. "I didn't know he was dead," he says, but doesn't bother to ask how Lenfestey died. After that he listens without comment or emotion as I tell him what we have been doing the past two days. I finish by saying we heard he didn't attend his sister's funeral.

"For only one reason, no one bothered to tell me of her death until long after the fact," he says, putting a little feeling into his words for the first time. After a short pause he adds, "To be honest about it, Ruth and I were never close. She was four years younger than me, and we lived in different worlds, really. There wasn't trouble between us, understand, but our lifestyles, our values when we were children, were at opposite ends of the poles."

"One of your old neighbors said she was a sweet girl, and pretty."

"Oh she was." He hesitates, then laughs harshly. "That's how everyone thought of Ruth—always sweet and good. I'm not saying she wasn't, I'm

not downgrading her, but it did get a little tiresome always being compared unfavorably. Everyone thought she could do no wrong, so it struck me funny when she threw over her childhood sweetheart to marry a smooth talker from the army base."

Driscoll and I exchange glances. He says, "We hadn't heard about the childhood sweetheart."

After all the years that have passed, Williams still seems to relish what to him was the showing of his sister's true colors. "From the time they were in the sixth grade they had this attraction for each other, and through high school she rarely dated anyone else. After graduation he went into the service, and they had an understanding that when he came back . . . but then Lenfesty showed up and her old sweetheart got a 'Dear John' letter while he was in Vietnam."

"What was the sweetheart's name?" Driscoll asks softly.

"Didn't I mention it?" Williams says. "It was Sideris. Kurt Sideris."

We pass the hour it takes to drive to Midland in silence. Driscoll, I know, sees it all from a viewpoint different from mine. I understand his feelings, his empathy for Sideris, be-

cause Driscoll also experienced Vietnam. My thoughts center on someone else, DeWon Mitchem.

I pull into the parking lot of a tavern far out on South Madison, the street that takes us uptown. When the bartender has drawn two beers, we carry them to a booth, where our silence resumes. Finally I say, "It seems to me this is where we turn it over to Staley."

Driscoll nods uninterestedly. Then after a moment he returns to the present with a start, saying, "But I think we're entitled to go along when he talks to Sideris."

It has been dark two hours, and a fierce wind rattles signs and blows debris along the streets when we set out to find Staley. We have been in no hurry because we want the story, assuming there is one, to break on *News-Banner* time, which means after *The Morning Sun* midnight deadline. With that in mind we have tracked down Steve Granger, the *Banner's* police reporter, and told him to remain available.

The search for Staley goes on for an hour, which fits well with our time schedule, and then it takes the better part of another to relate our story. Driscoll ends it by telling him we want to go along when he talks to Sideris.

Staley strokes his chin, frowning, then says, "Consid-

ering what you've told me, I don't have any choice but to arrest him and read him his rights immediately. I doubt if there'll be any talking after that." He glances briefly at the digital watch on his left wrist. "He'll be closing the store in fifteen minutes. I guess you can go along, you deserve that much, but stay in the background and keep your mouths shut."

We park near the curb and wait in the car until Sideris walks to the front door to lock up for the night. Then Staley and another detective he has taken along walk quickly to the door and on inside. Driscoll and I follow a little distance behind. By the time we enter the store, Sideris is being patted down by Caproletti, the second detective, and Staley is starting to read to him from a card.

Sideris smiles wryly, his eyes on me, until Staley finishes. Then he quietly says, "The right to remain silent? For what? I have an idea you know all there is to know, anyhow. In a way I'm kind of glad it's over." He pauses, looking around the store for what he knows may be the last time. Satisfied, he fixes his gaze on Staley and says, "You know what he did, don't you, that Lenfestey? Not only ruined her life but killed her, too. Ruth deserved the best, but she got the worst, she got Lenfestey. So I lured him up here on the pretext of knowing some-

thing about the death of their two boys years ago. I planned to take him somewhere and kill him for what he had done."

Forgetting Staley's orders, I ask, "But why did you have to involve DeWon Mitchem?"

"Because Lenfestey started getting nasty and I knew I'd have trouble getting him off by himself. That's when the kid came in and I changed plans. It was just Mitchem's bad luck, that's all. I took care of Lenfestey first, then when it was all over I locked the door and pulled the shades. After that I went out the back way and got an old gun I kept in the glove compartment, one I bought years ago on the street and knew couldn't be traced to me. When I came back inside, I lifted the kid so he was standing, stuck the gun in his hand and fired one shot, then called the police."

For an hour or more Driscoll and I sit quietly at a table in the nearly deserted lounge at the hotel, lost in our private thoughts. Then Staley joins us. Still no one has anything to say. There is none of the excitement, the feeling of accomplishment that usually goes with the completion of a job. Staley finishes his drink, pushing his chair away from the table and getting up at the same time. Driscoll follows his lead, but stands looking down at me from eyes

glassy with fatigue and drink.

"Tragedy on top of tragedy," he says softly, then kicks the leg of the table and laughs bitterly. "No matter how high a wall you build, it still gets through to you. All these years now, but that war, it just keeps coming back. It just won't let you alone."

I stay where I am for a moment or two after they have gone, then get up and slowly climb the stairs to my rooms on the third floor. My body is tired, but not as tired as my mind. Even so, sleep is out of the question until certain thoughts are expurgated. It can be done only one way, by putting them on paper.

I retrieve the old portable Royal from the back of the bedroom closet, take it into the other room, and shove papers aside so there is space for it on the desk. Then, with a glass from the bathroom and a bottle from the bottom drawer close beside a stack of yellowed copy paper, I am ready.

The story I write is one of childhood love. A complicated first love filled with the exhilaration of youth, but also the uncertainty that tempers that exhilaration. The love of a happy-go-lucky boy forced to become a man, a killer, overnight. A love that was the one good thing, the one sane and

reliable thing remaining in a world that to him had gone mad. A focal point that made it possible to retain some portion, however small, of the qualities and values that once had been dominant, that had formed his character. And then it, too, was taken from him.

Jake looks up, frowning through a cloud of smoke, when I lay the three typewritten pages on his desk.

"What's this?" he asks, beginning to read.

"My column. Substitute it for the one scheduled today."

"You didn't do it on a VDT?" He glances at the clock. "It isn't in the system?"

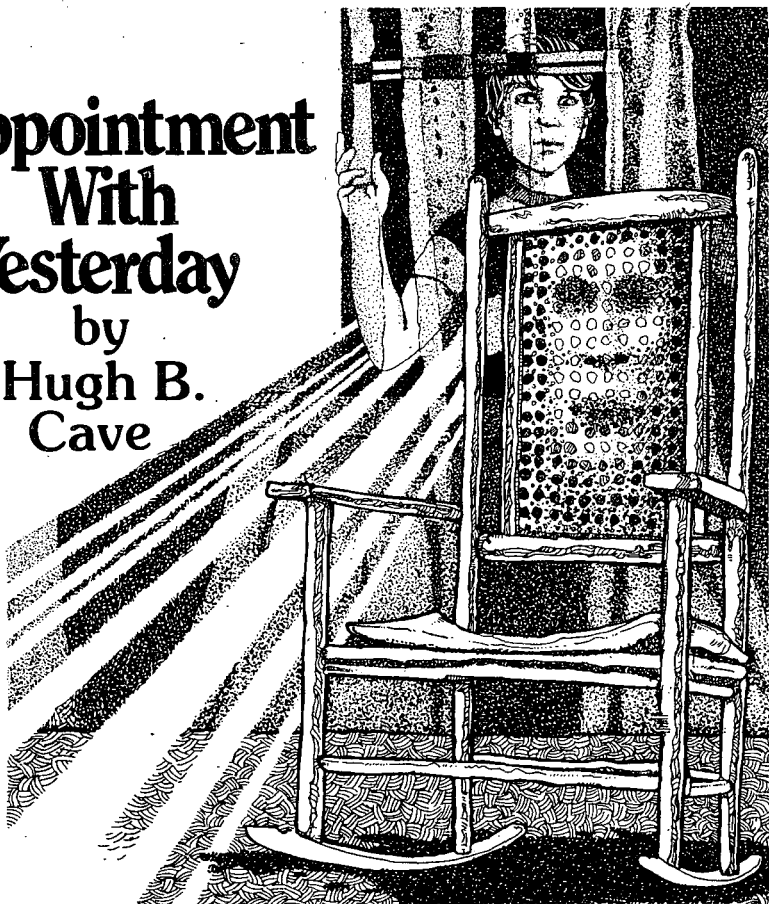
"I wrote it last night at home. Let them set it in the composing room."

"I don't know, Hal, it's getting late and—" He trails off as he goes on to the second page, then the third. When he finishes he looks up, shaking his head a little. "It's maudlin, Hal, but if it's the best you can come up with . . ."

I walk to the window and for a moment stare out at the leafless trees spaced along the opposite sidewalk. The clouds are low and dark, there is a chill look to everything. Jake is right, it's a maudlin story. Right from the very beginning. Right to the very end.

Appointment With Yesterday

by
Hugh B.
Cave



On the way back to camp that evening, following an afternoon at the seashore, the redhaired boy said, "You guys go ahead, y' hear? Tommy and I got somethin' to do."

"Like what?" he was asked.

"Like never mind. You'll see. Come on, Tommy."

There was still a good hour of daylight left. This was July on Cape Cod. The redhead and little bespectacled Tommy Hibbert, who always did what the redhead wanted, turned off along a sandy footpath, leaving the other six boys of Cabin One to continue along the forest road. All eight were from a Providence, Rhode Island,

boys' club, in camp for a month as part of a program for underprivileged youth.

"Boy, will they be surprised when we turn up with it!" said the redhead, whose name was Mark Watson. At fourteen he was the oldest in Cabin One and naturally the captain. "The only thing is, we have to make sure old Fowler don't see us."

"Will it be dark when we reach camp?"

"Should be, just about."

"What's the problem, then, Markie?"

"The darned thing's *big*. That's what's the problem."

"Oh."

The path they followed was a link between two dirt roads. One road led from a main highway to the camp on the lake. Where the other came from or went to neither boy knew. All they knew was that in an overgrown field by the side of it stood an old Cape Cod cottage, apparently long abandoned, known to all at the camp as the "haunted house." When you came to Camp Wampanoag and heard about the murder from kids who had been to camp before, you had to visit the place. There was a camp rule against it, but you had to go anyway. It was an initiation, kind of.

Approaching the cottage now, redhaired Mark Watson grinned at his protégé. "You scared, Tommy?"

"Not of the house. Only of what'll happen if old Fowler—"

"I tell you he won't know. By the time he even sees what we got, we'll have it fixed up and painted. We'll just tell him we made it."

"Well . . . okay. If you say so."

They trudged through the tall grass to the front door, which made a noise like a stepped-on cat when Mark pushed it open. Had it screeched that way when the robber opened it that night? Probably not. The house was being lived in then by old Mrs. Lazarus, and the hinges wouldn't have been rusty like now.

"I bet he just opened the door real slow," Mark said. "I bet she never even heard him before he squeezed the trigger. Then, pow!"

"What?"

"That's how it must have happened. He was after the money she was supposed to have stashed away here someplace. He just inched this door open" —Mark read mystery stories and intended to write them someday— "and she was sittin' there in that chair with her back to him, rockin' away all unsuspectin', and he shot her."

"You sure she was *shot*, Markie?"

"Well, I never heard any different."

"Did you ever ask?"

"No, I never asked. Why would I ask, for Pete's sake? What difference does it make, anyway?"

The younger boy sensed he was making the redhead angry. "Well, gee, all right, Markie. I was just wonderin'."

The grit on the old board floor made scrunchy sounds under Mark's shoes as he walked toward the chair, which was the only piece of furniture in the room. For that matter, it was the only thing in the whole house, he knew. The kitchen, the dining room, the two bedrooms upstairs—all were empty now. Halting beside the chair, he looked around while waiting for the other boy to join him. To tell the truth, he felt a little scared.

But there was nothing to be afraid of, he told himself. It was just a grimy old living room in an abandoned cottage. The walls were yellow and dirty, with crazy cracks running every which way through the faded flowers on their peeling paper. What else could you expect?

"Come on, will you?" he urged his companion.

"This is it?" Tommy said on reaching Mark's side.

"This is it. The old lady was sittin' in this when she was killed. Anyway, that's the story." The chair lay on its side, and Mark leaned over to touch it. "See what I mean? How we can fix it up?"

"Not like it was, we can't."

"We can come close. Anyway, it'll be the chair she was murdered in, even if it don't look exactly the same as then." Reaching down, Mark took hold of its one unbroken arm. "Come on now. Let's get it out of here!"

It was not an easy task for two boys their age and size. The chair was of Cape Cod pine and fairly heavy. Worse, it was bulky. After a number of tries they settled on a way of carrying it between them with one boy holding the arm, the other an edge of the seat, which was intact. Even so it kept bumping their legs and thighs, and they had to stop often to rest.

Only once were they forced to move off the road to avoid being seen—or "detected," as the future writer of mystery tales would have put it. They were back on the camp road at the time, and heard a pickup coming. "Hey!" Mark hissed in alarm. "It could be Fowler!"

But while the director often did drive the pickup, he was not in it when it passed them. At the wheel was Edgar Nesbit, the middle-aged camp handyman, too interested in sipping from a pint bottle to be aware of the two boys crouching beside their stolen rocking chair in the roadside underbrush.

Edgar almost always had a bottle to sip from—a thing Mr. Darren Fowler, with all his snooping, never seemed to find out. The kids knew but liked Edgar well enough to keep quiet about it. Besides, he didn't get drunk; he just drank.

"All right," Mark chortled as they scrambled back onto the road with their burden. "That's one we don't have to watch out for. Now we only have to get past the others." The others, of course, included Fowler, an assistant director, and several counselors.

But, thanks to the chair, their timing turned out to be excellent, and they arrived at the camp just at dark. Five minutes of waiting behind an old sawdust pile—the place had been a sawmill site once—and they were able almost to stroll to their cabin without danger of being seen. In a welter of excitement their cabin mates crowded around them.

"There it is!" the redhead gloated, propping the broken chair up so it appeared to be almost usable. "Old lady Lazarus was murdered in this, by gosh, and when we go back to Providence, I'm takin' it with me!"

"How?" someone demanded.

"Never mind how. I'll think of somethin'. But when I start writin' my mystery stories, this is the chair I'll be writin' 'em in."

"Writers use typewriters nowadays, Markie. Even computers."

"All right. I'll think 'em up in this chair, then. That's the most important thing—thinkin' 'em up!" He gave the chair a prideful pat, which promptly caused it to fall over on its side as it had been in the front room of the haunted house. "But first we got to fix it up. And fast, before anyone sees it and figures out where it came from."

That night the chair lay in a corner of the cabin, half hidden by the end of the double bunk in which the redhead and his protégé, Tommy, slept. In the morning, after breakfast and chores, Mark went to Edgar Nesbit, the camp handyman, to borrow some tools.

"What you want them for?" About fifty, Nesbit had a beard the color of salt and pepper mixed together in a shaker, and eyes so bright blue they looked artificial. He'd been born there on the Cape, less than five miles from the camp.

"I'll show you when we get it done."

"You want them right *now*? You skippin' the swim?"

"We went to the ocean yesterday."

"Okay." Nesbit shrugged to show it made no difference to him. Then he produced, on request, a hammer, a saw, a hand drill, nails and screws and a screwdriver. When asked for scrap wood, he

shrugged again and pointed to an assortment of it on the floor of his workshop.

Mark returned to Cabin One laden and triumphant, and by nightfall the chair had two arms instead of one. Next day it acquired a new rocker and new rungs, though in referring to them as "rungs" the future author admitted he might not be using the proper word. "When I write about this someday, which I intend to, I'll look it up. We don't have time now."

The carpentry finished, back he went to Edgar Nesbit to beg some paint.

"Now, what in the world are you kids doing over there in that cabin?" Edgar demanded. "What you want paint for?"

"We'll show you when it's finished. Please, Edgar? Just a small can of enamel?"

"What color?"

"Well—red." That was the proper color for a murder chair, no?

The following day the old rocking chair, rebuilt and painted fire-engine red, was ready for use, though it looked nothing at all like the one old Mrs. Lazarus had been murdered in.

Now began the games.

With little Tommy Hibbert seated in the chair, solemnly staring at the cabin wall while he rocked, Mark showed the others how the murder must have been committed. Going outside and closing the door behind him, he waited, like the mystery-story writer he intended to be, for suspense to build up inside. Then he silently eased the door open, stepped over the threshold, whipped up his right hand, and said, "Pow!"

Tommy obediently slumped forward in the chair and began groaning.

"You say he was after her money?" one of the other boys said.

"That's the story. People in the village said she had a pile of it hidden away in the house somewhere, though she pretended to be poor."

"Where would an old lady like that get a whole lot of money?"

"Well, she was some kind of witch. Like she told fortunes and stuff."

"There's a Lazarus in the Bible," someone said. "Jesus raised him from the dead."

"That was a *man*, dummy. Anyway, this old lady had a pile of money and this guy, whoever he was, was after it."

"Did he find it?"

"Now, that's a stupid question if I ever heard one. How do we

know if he found it or not, when we don't even know who he was?"

"They never arrested nobody?"

"Uh-uh." Mark wagged his head. "They never had a clue."

"Didn't they find a bullet or anything?" someone asked. "If he shot her in the back, like you say, the bullet must have stayed in her or gone through into a wall or somethin'."

From the expression on Mark's face it was plain to see the future writer of mysteries hadn't thought of that and was annoyed with himself. Luckily he was saved from having to think up a reply when little Tommy Hibbert, still in the chair, suddenly voiced an exclamation.

"Hey! It's moving!"

They all looked at him.

"It's moving!" Tommy propelled himself out of the chair as though it had suddenly become electrified. The leap sent him sprawling to his hands and knees on the cabin floor, where he twitched himself around to look at the chair in astonishment.

The chair was slowly rocking. It continued to rock until Mark reached out and stopped it.

"You're a nut," Mark said. "You rocked it yourself, dummy."

"I did not! I was just sitting there!"

"You rocked it. Anyone sittin' in a rockin' chair rocks it, even without thinkin'."

"I tell you I didn't," Tommy insisted, though less emphatically than before.

"Look." Mark sat in the chair. "I'll show you."

They watched, some standing within arm's reach, some seated on their bunks. The redhead sat in the chair and nothing happened for what seemed a long time, though surely it was less than a minute.

Then the chair began to rock.

"See?" Mark pushed himself out of it. "You don't know you're doin' it, even. But you do it."

Satisfied, they let the matter drop and began discussing a treasure hunt scheduled for the following day. In charge of that event was the one person in camp they unanimously disliked: the assistant director, Joel Abbott. It was Joel, born in a nearby Cape village, who had gruffly warned all of them to stay away from the house from which Mark and Tommy had removed the chair.

"That house is out of bounds to you kids. And I mean it, you hear?" With his fists on his hips and his head thrust forward like a rooster's, he had snarled his ultimatum. "You go snooping around

there, and you'll find yourselves taking the next bus back to Providence!"

Question: should they boycott the treasure hunt to show the assistant director how little they thought of him?

It was a lively discussion.

But Mark, having retired to his lower bunk, did not enter into it. He sat there with his elbows on his knees and his chin on his fists, and gazed at the red rocking chair as though it puzzled him.

His protégé, losing interest in the treasure-hunt talk, retired to the bunk above him, leaned over, and said quietly, "Did you, Markie?"

"Did I what?"

"Make it move? Or did it move by itself, like I said?"

"I dunno." The redhead scratched a corner of his mouth. "I don't *think* I made it move, Tommy, but I dunno."

Now for two days the chair stood in the center of the cabin, and the boys took turns sitting in it. Some said it moved of its own accord; others said they were crazy. Around camp it became known that the boys of Cabin One had finished a carpentry project, building themselves a rocking chair. The director, Mr. Darren Fowler, came and admired it, praising them for their ingenuity. So did the assistant director, Joel Abbott, and the counselors. None of them recognized the chair as the one from the abandoned home of the murdered Mrs. Lazarus.

Finally, one evening just before dark, Edgar Nesbit, the camp handyman, came to see what had been achieved with his tools, lumber, and paint.

"Well, I'll be gosh darned," he said, gazing at the chair in wonder. His breath betrayed the fact he had been sipping again.

The boys grinned at one another, and one said, "Give it a try, Edgar. It works real good."

"I bet it does." Edgar eased himself down onto it. Then, obviously enjoying himself, he gripped its arms and closed his eyes and began rocking.

Suddenly the chair went all the way back and so did Edgar's head, with something apparently pulling at his hair. His eyes opened wide in bright blue terror and his neck arched up with his Adam's apple all but popping out of it. And across his neck, just above the Adam's apple, appeared a line of crimson, as though someone had taken a red-ink marking pen and drawn it from under one ear to under the other.

It seemed he tried to scream but couldn't, and only made a gurgling, bubbling sound as though his throat had been slashed.

Terrified by what looked like the man's death throes, the boys fled wildly from the cabin. Mark Watson, the future writer of mysteries, was the only one to pause in the doorway and look back.

When they returned with the director and his assistant a few minutes later, the man in the rebuilt rocking chair was dead. The line of red across his throat was already fading. But what was in those brilliant blue eyes would go with him to his grave.

It was terror. Sheer, total, heart-stopping terror.

"This chair!" Mr. Fowler fiercely turned on young Mark Watson. "Did you make it as you said you did?"

"N-no, sir. N-not exactly. We made an old one over."

"Where did it come from?"

"The haunted house, sir."

Mr. Fowler turned in triumph to his assistant. "We seem to have solved an old mystery here, don't we? Even to how it happened. He must have opened the cottage door so quietly she didn't hear him. He walked up behind her and grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head back. He cut her throat."

Still staring at the man in the chair, the assistant director slowly nodded.

"All right," Mr. Fowler said then to the occupants of Cabin One. "You boys may use Cabin Four tonight; those lads went home today. Don't touch anything here. Just clear out with what you'll need."

The boys moved to the other cabin and talked in low tones about what had happened. All agreed that somehow the spirit of the murdered witch-woman must have been waiting there in the rocking chair, for revenge. After all, the Lazarus in the Bible had come back from the dead, hadn't he?

The future writer of mysteries was chided for his invention of the gun.

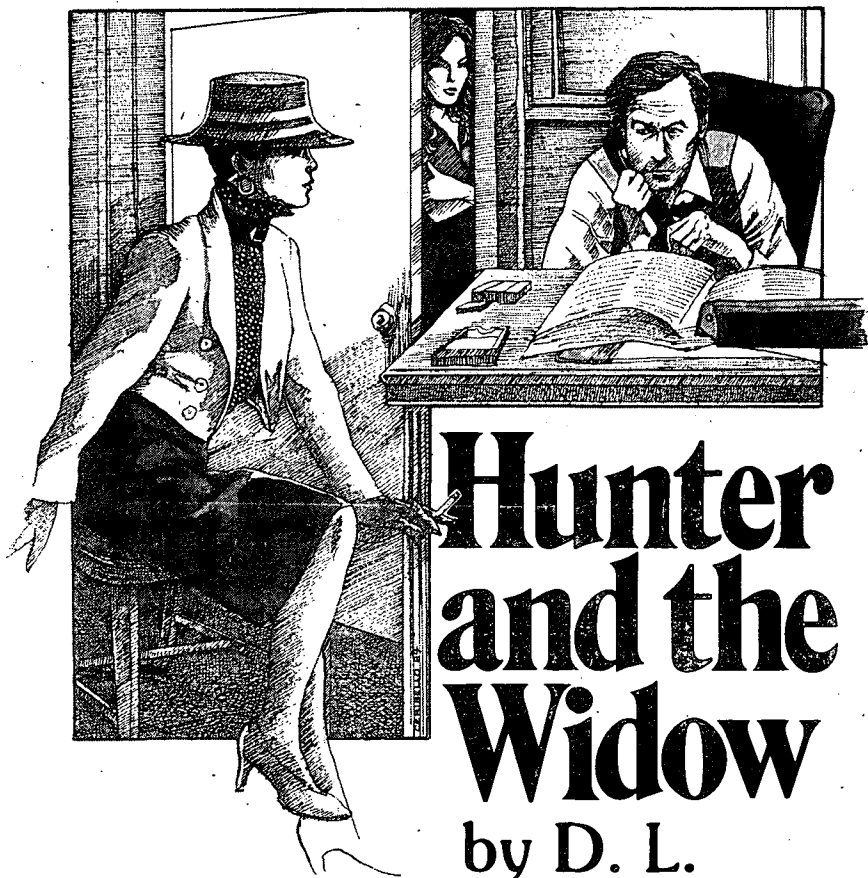
"You and your 'pow'! Ha!"

But the redhead had no time to waste on foolishness. "Never mind that, you dummies. Don't you see what we got here? This proves the killer never found the old lady's money. He wouldn't have been workin' here as a handyman if he did."

Mouths open, they stared at him.

"What we got to do now," he solemnly told them, "is go back to that old house and do some real detective work."

FICTION



Hunter and the Widow

by D. L.
Richardson

“Say I told you so and you’re fired.” Tracey, my secretary, scowled at me before continuing her ministrations. The warm water in the mixing bowl beside her thigh was a weak pink. Which is exactly

how I felt. Weak pink.

“Ouch!”

I jerked my head back and reached for my cheekbone, only to have my fingers slapped away and my chin clamped in her grasp. She resumed washing the blood from the gash just

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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under my left eye, her hazel gaze scrutinizing the damage.

"If ever anyone deserved an I-told-you-so, it's you," she said. "But since you never listen to me anyway, I won't waste my breath."

"That's not true," I said between gritted teeth. "I always listen to you." I tried to pull away, but she only tightened her grip.

"Sit still!" she snapped. "And quit scrunching up your face like that. If you listened to me, neither of us would be here at three A.M. doing a bad imitation of some old movie."

She had a point. If I had listened to her, we wouldn't be watching a bowl of water turn red with my blood. She wouldn't be perched on my coffee table in jeans and an ice-blue satin pajama jacket trying to find my face amidst the cuts and scrapes and blood. I wouldn't be sitting on my couch trying to decide which hurt worse—the cheek she was cleaning or the chin she was gripping—and wondering, rather irreverently, if she was wearing anything under that blue satin.

"That cut and the one on your forehead need stitches." She surveyed her handiwork and then looked me in the eye. She scowled again. "Don't you think you've had enough trouble for one night, Adam Hunter, without asking for more?"

I had the decency to look

sheepish as she gathered up the bowl and the first-aid paraphernalia and headed for the kitchen. Sometimes I had the notion that she was a witch. I mean, it wasn't natural for someone to be able to read minds the way she could read mine.

I relaxed back into the softness of the couch and closed my eyes against the dull throbbing that was steadily permeating every centimeter of my body. I could hear Tracey in the kitchen.

I hated it when Tracey was right. Probably because she was right so often.

"Here's the rough draft of your story," Tracey laid the pages in front of me. "And that phone call was your editor reminding you that he's still waiting for the last five chapters of *Murder by Yesterday*."

"He'll have to wait a little longer. I've got a job."

"Not her?" Tracey jerked her thumb in the direction of the door that, just moments before, had closed behind my new client.

"Her name is Easter Simmons, and yes, she's the one."

Tracey studied me for a moment, her lips pressed together, her eyes narrowed. With a deep breath and a single shake of her head, she left my office. I heard the rollers on her chair squeak when she sat down.

Damn! She was always doing that to me. This time I vowed not to give in. I pulled the notepad out from under the freshly typed manuscript and studied the notes I had just made. Typing sounds came from the outer office. Vicious typing sounds. Fifteen minutes later (a new endurance record for me), I was perched on the front of her desk.

"You don't think I should take the case."

"No." She pulled the page from the typewriter and scanned it.

"You don't even know what the case is."

"It's not the case that bothers me."

"What then?"

"Her."

"What about her?"

"I don't trust her."

"Why?"

She inserted a fresh piece of paper into the typewriter, the platen making clicking sounds of protest. "I never trust anyone named after a holiday." She pushed her reading glasses back up on the bridge of her nose and resumed typing without so much as a glance at me. The yellow pencil behind her ear was a sharp contrast to her short, dark hair.

Had I not known better, I would have said that Tracey's mistrust of my new client was, in actuality, a bad case of the green monsters. Easter Simons had the looks to bring out

the cat in a lot of women.

Medium height and willowy with shoulder-length, wheat-colored hair. Dazzling green eyes. Expensive clothes. The air of a woman who always got what she wanted.

Trouble was, I *did* know better, and Tracey wasn't the catty type.

"Maybe she was born on Easter and had eight or nine older brothers and sisters and her parents just ran out of favorite names," I offered.

"Maybe." She was still typing.

The subtle approach was getting me nowhere, so I reached over and flicked the switch on the electric typewriter. With a sigh, Tracey removed her glasses and swiveled her chair a quarter turn toward me. Her eyes always got to me, and the teal blouse she wore turned them a deep aquamarine that made matters worse.

"Why don't you trust her?"

"The way I understand it, she stands to lose a great deal of money if you find this long-lost stepson."

"Ah ha! You were eavesdropping."

"You left the door open."

So I had.

Tracey continued. "Her husband's been dead for over a year. Why look for the stepson now, after all this time?"

"You heard her. She *has* been looking for him. It's taken this

long to get a solid lead. After all, Lexington, Kentucky, is a long way from Los Angeles." My explanation obviously didn't satisfy her suspicious mind. "What else bothers you?"

"Let's assume that she's telling the truth. That she has spent this last year looking for her stepson. That she's hired the kind of agencies only wealth can afford, agencies with lots of contacts and manpower. Why come to you now? Why not stick with the people who were able to track him down?"

"She wanted someone local who was familiar with the territory and the people."

"Then why not hire one of the larger agencies in town, like Marshall and Associates? They do security work for several of the horse farms. Why come to you, a writer, who only does this on a part-time basis?"

"If I weren't such a secure individual, I could really be hurt by that remark. Besides, you heard her. She doesn't want to make a big production out of this. She's afraid she'll scare him so far off she'll never be able to find him again."

"That simply means that she gets to keep all the money."

"Maybe, but she feels the money is his, and she can't, in good conscience, spend what isn't hers to spend."

"She said that?"

"She said that."

"And you believe her?"

"I believe her."

"I should think gullibility would be a hindrance to a private investigator."

"There's a difference between being gullible and trusting your client."

Tracey shook her head with a sigh, put her glasses on, and swiveled back to the typewriter. She flipped the switch. "Have it your way. I'm just the hired help."

I rose from the desk and headed back to my office, her voice stopping me in the doorway.

"But don't expect me to be there to put you back together again."

"Why should I need anyone to put me back together?"

"Are you forgetting that walking mountain she calls a chauffeur?"

"Lots of ladies with her kind of money have chauffeurs who double as bodyguards."

"People with bodyguards tend to draw undesirables. Otherwise they wouldn't need bodyguards."

I smiled. "It's nice to know you care."

"I just want to be sure you're around to sign my pay check at the end of the week."

I put my feet up on the coffee table, wincing at the pain in my ribs.

"You probably have two or three cracked ribs, too."

I opened my eyes to find Tracey standing in front of me, a pottery mug in her hand.

"I've already told you I'm not going to the hospital, Tracey. I'm not in the mood to make explanations."

"Suit yourself." She thrust the mug toward me. "Drink this."

I took it from her. "What is it?"

"Hemlock. It will put you out of your misery." She turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

A quick sniff confirmed it to be her special hot toddy. I took a cautious sip and welcomed the warmth that trickled down my esophagus. After two more sips, the whisky spread its own special warmth to combat the pain in my aching body.

I surveyed the mess that had been my living room. At the hospital there would be questions about my injuries, and questions meant explanations, and explanations meant lies because at this point the puzzle pieces were still scattered around the table. Hell. I wasn't too sure I even had all the pieces.

Brad Walters. Easter Simmons' stepson, Brantley Simmons, was using the name Brad Walters and had been working on a horse farm in the Lexington area for the last six months. She didn't know which one.

It wasn't much help, considering that there must be two hundred or more horse farms of varying size and prosperity within a fourteen-mile radius of Lexington. That's a lot of legwork. I decided to let my fingers do the walking and called an old friend at Marshall and Associates. They did security work for several of the local horse farms, and while finding Walters/Simmons working on one of those particular farms was a long shot, it was a place to start.

And I got lucky.

My friend had been predictably reluctant to release company information, but he owed me more than one favor, a point I was quick to make. Before long, he came up with the information I needed. Brad Walters had applied for a job at Willow Hill Farm, and a security check had netted strong recommendations from a horse breeder in Texas and a horse trainer out in L.A. As far as my friend knew, he was still there.

The next morning, after a call to the farm's manager, I left Tracey in the office and headed out Newtown Pike to Willow Hill, a small, but respected, brood mare farm a couple of miles past Ironworks Pike. It was a warm, sunny May morning, one of those days that Kentuckians dream about in February. The pastures were emerald green and lush. A few dogwoods still dotted the coun-

tryside with their white and pink lacework. A day for rolling down the car windows and inhaling the spring-scented air.

I shifted my position carefully, gritting my teeth against the pain. Another sip of Tracey's "hemlock" helped. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

It was hard to believe it had only been three days ago that I had bumped my way down a gravel lane to the main barn. Only three days since I had stood in the warm morning, savoring the sights and sounds of a working farm. Only three days since I had leaned against a plank fence and talked with a living, breathing Brad Walters. Too much can happen in three days.

I watched the farm manager talk to two men, point in my direction, and then disappear into the barn. I waited as the two conferred before one of them moved in my direction. With interest, I watched Brad Walters/Brantley Simmons approach.

He was about six feet tall with thick black hair, ruffled by the breeze. He wore scuffed boots, faded jeans, and a checked shirt with its long sleeves rolled up to reveal strong forearms already beginning to tan. As he got nearer, he pulled off work gloves to reveal long, blunt-

ended fingers which he offered in a handshake.

"Mr. Hunter? I'm Brad Walters," he said in a clear baritone.

I returned the firm grip, studying the smooth planes of his face and the almost-black eyes. Somehow, he wasn't what I had expected.

"Mr. Trexler said you wanted to talk to me about a missing person, someone I might have met in Houston when I worked there."

"That's really only part of the truth. The person isn't actually missing. He's been found, only he doesn't know it yet. I was hired to tell him he's been found."

"I'm not sure I understand any of this, but if I can help you, I'll be glad to. Who is this guy?" he drawled.

"You."

For a brief moment he looked puzzled, and then he grinned. "Me? Who in the world would be looking for me?"

"Your stepmother."

The grin was gone, and the puzzled look was back. "My stepmother? Mr. Hunter, you must have me confused with someone else. I don't have a stepmother."

Easter's description of Brantley's departure from the Simmons household had prepared me for this reaction.

"Listen, Brad," I said, trying to maintain a friendly atmos-

phere by using his chosen alias, "your stepmother explained about the estrangement between you and your father that led to your leaving home. She also explained that you might be reluctant to come home."

"Wait a minute. Maybe you'd better tell me who my stepmother is."

"Easter Simmons."

I thought for an instant that something flashed in his eyes, but it was so brief that I wasn't sure.

"Easter hired you to find me?"

"Not exactly. She's been looking for you for a year, ever since—" I didn't know any better way to say it "—ever since your father died. She wasn't sure if you had even heard about his death."

"Yeah, I heard the old man got into one too many board meeting arguments and had a heart attack and died." He stuck his hands in his hip pockets. "Unless I'm badly mistaken, that makes Easter a very wealthy woman."

"It also makes you a wealthy man. Your father left a sizable portion of his estate to you. Easter hired several agencies to track you down. When they discovered that you had changed your name and were working on a horse farm in this area, she decided to come talk to you herself."

"Easter is here? In Lexington?"

I nodded. "She hired me to talk to you first. She wasn't sure you'd see her."

Brad was silent, and I gave him time to think before I continued.

"She wants you to know there are no strings attached to the inheritance. All you have to do is go back to L.A. with her to meet with the lawyers and get the paperwork taken care of."

"That's all I have to do, huh?"

Something in his voice struck a wrong chord deep in my brain, but I dismissed it: After all, I was dredging up a past he had discarded.

"That's all." I pulled a business card from my shirt pocket. "Here's my card with my office and home phones. Easter is staying at the Hyatt, and I've written her room number on the back. I won't even tell her where you work. You can call and talk to her yourself, or you can talk to her through me. It's up to you."

Brad looked at the small, buff-colored card, turning it over in his fingers and reading each side at least twice.

"When do I have to give her an answer?"

"Any time within the next two days. She said something about a clause in the will that says you have to claim your inheritance within a specific length of time or it reverts to her."

He nodded, a sardonic smile

on his face. "My stepmother always did have a flair for the dramatic."

There was some bitterness in his voice. But what can you expect from someone whose stepmother is his own age?

"Don't be too hard on her. You haven't been the easiest person to find."

"Yeah. I guess not." He extended his hand again. "Thanks."

I shook his hand. "There's really nothing to thank me for."

"Oh, I don't know. You may have helped make me a wealthy man." That sardonic smile was back again. "Make sure you send my stepmother a big bill. She can afford it."

I thought about that drive back to the office. My conversation with Brad Walters had put a damper on my earlier high spirits. Something had kept nagging at me. Something I couldn't point a finger to and say, "Ah ha!"

Maybe it had been his attitude. His voice when speaking of his father's death had shown no remorse, no concern, nothing. And there had been a definite snideness in his references to his stepmother. But I didn't know the true situation. I didn't even know Brad Walters. I only knew what Easter Simmons had told me, and who was to say that was an accurate picture? No, it had to have been something else.

I had pushed it out of my mind, telling myself that I had done what I was hired for. Anything else would constitute meddling.

The sounds of Tracey moving quietly around the room broke through my thoughts. I opened one eye to see her righting a hassock. She picked up a lamp from the floor, straightened its shade, and replaced it on the table next to the chair. She disappeared down behind the chair.

"I didn't hire you to be a maid," I said.

The lamp came on.

"You didn't hire me to be a nurse either, but I seem to have done more than my share of that," she said, standing back up, hands on hips. "Besides which, this place will have to be straightened some before a maid can even get in. Most maids don't clean up after demolition derbies." She plucked a velvet pillow from the carpet.

"You could be destroying evidence, you know."

She looked me straight in the eye. "Are you planning to call the police after all?"

In the silence I regarded the score. Tyler, two; Hunter, nothing, and fading fast.

"I thought not." She returned to her self-assigned chore.

I watched her for a while. Watched her movements. Athletically graceful. No energy wasted. I found myself thinking it was a sight I could get used

to and decided I must have taken a harder shot to the head than I had first thought.

I closed my eyes again only to have her image reappear in my mind. This time she was standing in front of my desk, looking too much like a knock-out in red and black, a folded newspaper in her hand.

“I know you don’t read the newspaper this early in the day, but I think you should make an exception today.”

I looked up at her to argue but was stopped by the look in her eyes. I took the paper and began to read the story made prominent by her folding. I read the headline and lead paragraph, looked back up at her, and then finished the short item.

Brad Walters had been killed by a hit and run driver on Newtown Pike. According to co-workers, Walters, a photography buff, had walked a quarter mile up the road to photograph a dogwood. When he hadn’t returned after a reasonable amount of time, one of the men had gone looking for him and found him in the ditch, dead.

“Seems hard to believe that I just talked to him yesterday morning.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“What do you want me to say? That Easter Simmons could have saved her money? Hit and

run is not uncommon, Tracey. Not even here. It’s just a coincidence. A rotten one, but a coincidence nonetheless.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” she said in a tight voice and left, closing the door with more force than necessary.

Truth be known, neither do I. That same uneasy nagging I’d had the morning before was back. I read the article once more. Then again. And it hit me. The reason for the nagging.

According to the paper, Brad Walters was from Eagle Lake, Texas. When I had spoken with him, I had been aware that his voice hadn’t sounded exactly as I’d thought it should. He had a Texas drawl, an authentic Texas drawl. The kind you don’t acquire overnight. Marshall and Associates hadn’t discovered that Brad Walters was Brantley Simmons either, and they were much too thorough to overlook something like that.

I grabbed my windbreaker from the antique hall tree and stepped into the outer office. Tracey was proofreading.

“I’m going to see Charlie Whisk.”

“You could call him and save time.”

“I need the fresh air.”

I took the stairs at a half run, barely missing the guy from the pest control outfit come to check the messages on his answering machine in his tiny office across the hall from mine. When I

reached the street, I turned right toward West Main Street, my back to West Vine. At the corner I turned right again. Charlie Whisk had a small work area above his cousin's camera supply store on East Main. When it came to computers, Charlie Whisk was a certified genius, and he was also a good friend. Right now I needed quick access to information from distant parts, and Charlie's computer terminal was faster than a Concorde.

I emerged an hour later and retraced my steps, having left Charlie a happy man. I had always been a little uneasy about using Charlie and had told him so once. He had laughed, rubbed his hands together, and said he could tiptoe through anybody's data banks and never leave a trace. For some reason that didn't make me feel better.

"Any calls for me?" I asked Tracey upon my return.

"No."

"None at all?"

"None."

"Are you sure?"

I recognized that look and put my hands up in surrender. "Sorry. I just expected the police to have called before now."

She followed me into my office. "Why would the police call you?"

I put my jacket back on the hall tree and sat down behind my desk. "When I talked to Brad Walters yesterday, I gave

him my business card."

Tracey sat on the front of my desk. "And you think they would have checked with you even though they're calling it hit and run?"

"They should have at least been curious as to why a horse farm worker would need a private investigator."

She nodded and went off into her own thoughts.

"Do you know the number for the Hyatt?" I asked, picking up the phone.

"I'm sure it's in the book."

I ignored her sarcasm, flipped quickly through the phone directory, and penciled the number on a notepad.

"Why are you calling the Hyatt?"

I started dialing. "To see if the police have contacted Mrs. Simmons. Her room number was also on the business card."

"I'll leave the two of you alone, then," she said, slipping off my desk and out of my office, her perfume following her.

Two minutes later I was even more puzzled. The bodyguard-chauffeur had answered the phone and said that Mrs. Simmons was too upset to talk. I'd be upset, too, if I'd just inherited an extra ten million dollars. Whatever would I spend it on?

Tracey poked her head in the door. "Well?"

"The police haven't called her either."

"Curious."

"That's the word for it." I picked up the phone.

"Who are you calling now?"

"Newman."

She groaned, "I'm not here," and left.

Newman was my very limited pipeline into the Metro police department. Obnoxious and overbearing, he was not one of my favorite people, but a source is a source. Tracey didn't agree.

That uneasy feeling got worse after talking to Newman. So bad that I moved to the couch. Tracey came in and leaned against the end of my desk.

"He makes me feel the same way," she said.

"He asked for you."

"Spare me. Please."

I had to grin.

"What did you find out from Mr. Personality?"

"Zip. As far as Metro is concerned, it's straight hit and run."

"And the business card?"

I shook my head. "Nada. All he had on him was a billfold, a set of keys, and some loose change."

"Did you see where he put the card?"

"In his shirt pocket."

"Maybe it flew out when he was hit."

"Maybe."

"Or maybe he took it out before then and put it away somewhere."

"Maybe."

I looked up at her and saw that she was reading my thoughts again. I got up from the couch and grabbed my jacket.

"I'm going back out to Willow Hill. If Charlie calls, tell him I'll call him back."

I left her perched distractingly on the end of my desk.

But the trip to Willow Hill netted me nothing. Brad and two other hands shared a small house on the farm, and a search of his belongings turned up no little buff-colored card. When I got back to the office and returned Charlie's call, he confirmed my suspicions. I gave him another name to play with.

"Hunter, are you asleep?"

I opened my eyes to find Tracey leaning over me, something close to worry in her eyes, her perfume tickling my nose. Maybe the perfume was my imagination. After all, it was four A.M. Heck. Maybe the worry was my imagination.

"Just thinking." I smiled, or at least I think I did.

"I think you should go to bed and get some rest."

"You're probably right."

She frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Never mind. Can you manage by yourself?"

"Of course."

She stood back to give me room. She needn't have been in a rush about it. Slow was about as fast as I could manage. I finally got to my feet without too many un-macho grimaces and headed for the bedroom, grateful that Tracey was never out of reach.

"I suppose it would be chauvinistic of me to say that I don't like the idea of your driving home at this hour?"

"You should have thought of that at two A.M. when you called and asked me to come over here."

"Good point." I reached the bedroom door and stopped. "Do me a favor and be careful anyway."

"I will." There was a trace of a smile on her face.

I liked her smile. "Sweet dreams, Tyler."

The smile grew a little. "Sweet dreams, Hunter."

I entered the darkness of my bedroom, that smile following me, and made it to the bed. I managed to lower myself gently to the edge of it and shrug out of my shirt before the weariness overwhelmed me. The last thing I remember was my head hitting the pillow.

I awoke to bright sunshine and amnesia. My first movements dispelled the amnesia. I was stuck with the sunshine. A long, warm shower helped loosen the kinks in my stiff body and made the sunshine

look better, too. I decided breakfast might make me feel almost human again, so I headed for the kitchen. I got side-tracked.

Tracey was asleep on my couch. I wandered over, sat on the edge of the coffee table, and watched her for a moment, curled up on her side, a blanket pulled up under her chin.

"Time to get up, Tyler."

At first there was no reaction, and then she stirred.

"Hmmm?"

"I said, it's time to get up."

This time her eyes flew open, and there was momentary confusion in them until her memory woke up and filled her in. She stretched her arms above her head. "What time is it?"

I grabbed her left arm and looked at her watch. "Nearly ten. I thought I told you to go home?"

She sat up on the couch, and our knees nearly touched. "Don't let it go to your head, but I was worried about leaving you alone. You didn't look too well last night." She frowned as she studied the damage. "You don't look too well this morning, either."

"Thanks."

"For spending the night or telling you that you don't look so hot?"

I returned her grin. "Both."

"You're welcome."

I was working on my second cup of coffee and she was sip-

ping her second glass of orange juice before the case came up.

"Easter Simmons didn't take the news of your discovery too well, did she?" Tracey asked.

"What makes you say that?"

She reached out with gentle fingers and touched my face.

"Two cuts needing stitches, one puffy eye, one cut lip, and assorted bruises of varying colors."

"You left out the possible cracked ribs and the headache."

"I still think you should call the police."

"And tell them what? That two men I never saw clearly used my living room as a gym and me as a punching bag? Newman would love that."

"One man has been killed, Hunter. You could have been number two."

I leaned back and stretched out my legs. They ended up next to hers. I have a small kitchen table and long legs.

"But I wasn't. Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"How many times *did* they hit you?"

"Think about it, Tracey. Brad Walters was killed because of what he knew. I know what he knew and all I got was a slap on the wrist. Easter Simmons hired those two to deliver their late-night message. I'd bet on that. But I'd also bet she had nothing to do with Brad Walters' death."

"Simply because all you got was a beating?"

"And a warning to mind my own business."

I watched her consider.

"If she didn't kill Brad Walters, who did?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Some private investigator you are."

I grinned.

"As far as I can see, Easter Simmons is the only one with a motive," Tracey pointed out.

He was right. Because Charlie Whisk's little foray had turned up some interesting facts.

Fact number one: Brantley Simmons, age forty-five, was alive and prospering in L.A., impressing the pants off his father's colleagues with his brilliance in filling his father's shoes.

Fact number two: Brad Walters was Brad Walters. Had been since he was born, thirty years ago in Eagle Lake, Texas.

Fact number three: Easter Simmons knew Brad Walters. And vice versa. On her eighteenth birthday they were married.

Fact number four: Said marriage was never legally terminated.

And that had led me to a conversation and confrontation with Easter Simmons and fact number five: Someone had been blackmailing Easter with fact number four. She thought it was Brad Walters.

So Tracey was right. Easter Simmons had an excellent motive for killing Brad. At least most people would consider ten million plus dollars a good motive for murder, and ten million plus was what Easter stood to lose if certain people were to learn she wasn't Mrs. Simmons because she was still Mrs. Walters.

“It's a big step from lying to murder,” I said.

“Not for some people,” Tracey said. “You're going to have to tell the police what you know sooner or later.”

“I know. But not until I've talked to Charlie. He's checking something out for me.”

“What else is there to check out about her?”

“Not her. Edgar, her chauffeur.”

“His name is Edgar?”

I grinned. “I think it fits.”

“You would. Why are you checking him out?”

I thought about the way Edgar had first tried to keep me from seeing Easter and then had hovered close by, answering some questions for her, attempting to block others, until Easter had told him to get lost. She had been nervous and then outraged and then resigned. All reactions that I had expected. I hadn't expected Edgar to be so antsy. Protective, yes. Antsy, no.

“Curiosity.”

“You think Edgar took the bodyguard oath a little too seriously?”

“It's possible.”

“Do you think he was guarding Easter's body privately as well as publicly?”

“Your mind is in the gutter again, Tyler.” I got up from the table, taking my dirty dishes to the sink. “I'll meet you at the office in an hour. Charlie should be calling about then.”

“Yes, sir, boss man, sir.” She got up from the table. “Excuse me for forgetting my place, sir.”

Forty-five minutes later I was in the office. I rewound the tape on my answering machine and settled into my chair to listen and go through the mail. The third message made me forget the mail.

“This is Easter Simmons, Mr. Hunter. I must talk to you as soon as possible. I will be flying out of Lexington at four thirty this afternoon. Please call me here at the hotel before three o'clock. I *must* talk to you.”

I listened to the message again, the effect of her sultry voice dampened by obvious agitation.

I picked up the phone and began to dial.

“You can hang that up, Hunter. Mrs. Simmons has decided she has nothing to say to you.”

Edgar watched me from the doorway. With my eyes on the

gun in his hand, I replaced the receiver.

"How do you know that?"

He smiled. "She told me."

He moved into the office. The doorway was again blocked by an unsmiling gentleman of the same behemoth proportions as Edgar.

"Who's your friend?"

"Just someone I brought along."

Edgar's friend had a gun exactly like Edgar's, complete with silencer. I didn't like the looks of any of them—Edgar, his friend, or the guns.

"The message from Mrs. Simmons sounded urgent. What happened, Edgar? Did she figure out that you killed Brad Walters?"

"She's a lot smarter than most people give her credit for. I must say the same thing applies to you."

"People are always thinking of me as just another pretty face."

"How did you know that I killed Walters?"

I shrugged. "Who else could it be? Easter certainly didn't. All Walters really wanted was enough money for a small horse farm, and she was more than happy to give him that. In fact, she seemed surprised that Brad would even try blackmail."

"Ah, ah, ah. Put your hands back on the desk to where I can see them."

I smiled and obeyed. "I was

surprised, too. For someone who was supposedly blackmailing a wealthy woman, Brad Walters had little to show for it. According to his bank account, he had nothing to show for it. But I guess that's because Brad Walters wasn't blackmailing Easter. You were. I don't know how you found out about her first marriage, but you did. I bet your bank account would have a lot to say."

He smiled again. I was beginning to hate that smile.

"To keep suspicion off yourself, you worked out an elaborate scheme for getting the money. What did you do? Have King Kong here mail the letters from Lexington?"

"Something like that."

"Funny. He doesn't look that bright."

There was no reaction that I could see from his door-filling friend. That could mean one of two things. Either he was too dumb to know he was being insulted, or he was a very disciplined man. Either way it didn't look too good for me.

"Why did you kill Brad Walters?"

"You're the man with all the answers. You tell me."

"You knew that once he talked to Easter your little charade would be in trouble. You couldn't let that happen, so you killed him. You, or maybe Godzilla here, followed me out to Willow Hill when I went to talk to him.

Lucky for you he wanted to photograph that tree. It would have been hard to get into the farm undetected."

"His little hobby made it easy."

Now-I knew I hated that smile.

"That left you with two other problems. Easter and me."

"Easter's no problem. She's too scared of losing all that money. And you weren't a problem until you started snooping where you had no business. Like I said, I underestimated you."

"It was your idea to hire me and not one of the larger agencies."

"I just pointed out to her that a larger agency would be more likely to find out about her past. She picked your name out of the phone book."

The Yellow Pages really do work. "So now what?" I asked.

"So now we take a little walk."

Edgar motioned with his gun.

"Get up nice and easy. Tony, you make sure he's not carrying a gun."

Tony patted me down professionally, never putting himself between me and Edgar's gun.

"He's clean," he grunted.

"Oh, it talks, too."

Tony shoved me in the direction of the door. He wasn't so insensitive after all.

"We're going to take a little walk across Vine Street," Edgar said. "I want you to behave

yourself, Hunter. Got that?"

I nodded.

Edgar and Tony pocketed their guns and we left the office. No one passed us in the hall, and we met no one on the stairs. Outside, they positioned themselves on either side of me and herded me toward Vine. As we waited for the light to change, it occurred to me that we must look quite normal. I didn't feel normal.

The light changed and we crossed the street. Edgar smiled pleasantly and nodded at the young woman who passed us in the middle of the crosswalk. She smiled in return. Charming fellow, that Edgar.

I began to hope the light would change again. I preferred taking my chances in Lexington traffic, and one of them might get hit by some guy impatient to be wherever. No such luck. We reached the other side without incident, and Edgar steered me toward a gutted building. Tracey had told me it was being turned into a mini-mall with offices on the three upper floors.

Funny the things you remember in times of stress. I remembered the touch of her fingers on my face and the sight of her curled up on my couch. Damn!

Edgar removed a padlock and hustled me into the gloom of the building. I tried to drag my steps, but Tony shoved me on.

I suspected he took pleasure in manhandling me.

I kept my eyes open for a break, any break, but breaks are hard to come by when you find yourself wedged between a rock and a hard place. And that's where I was. Literally.

Tony must have scouted the place out beforehand because it was he who guided me through the gloom and the dirt and the work-in-progress. I wondered where the work crew was. Didn't make much difference. They weren't there.

We ended up in a cluttered corner far from where we had entered. Suddenly, the walk from the office seemed all too short.

"End of the line for you, Hunter," Edgar said. That was certainly an original remark.

There was light streaming through windows in the wall behind me. It made it easier to see the guns and the smile on Edgar's face.

"What makes you so sure Easter will keep quiet?"

It was a stall and Edgar knew it and didn't seem to mind.

"Like I said. She's too afraid of losing all that money. Brantley Simmons would just love to throw her out on her pretty little tail. And who would believe that she didn't kill Walters herself just to keep him quiet?"

"What about me? Isn't my death going to look suspicious?"

"A private investigator is

bound to make enemies. And since the work here has been put on hold for two months, Easter and I will be long gone before your body is even found. And there's nothing in particular to tie you to Walters."

"You took the business card."

"It pays to be thorough. Which is why Tony will pay a visit to your pretty secretary."

I stiffened.

"Now, now. Don't get upset. He won't kill her. Just scare her a little."

I knew Tracey didn't scare easily, but telling them would be the same as signing her death warrant.

"Put your hands over your heads, gentlemen. Now!"

Edgar and Tony whirled.

Every time I thought I had Tracey all figured out—wham!—she'd do something to blow it all away. Like the Colman party we'd gone to. She was waiting for me in the Colmans' foyer, looking terrific in a long-sleeved black dress that fell from the base of her throat to the floor, interrupted only by a red belt. Exactly what I would have expected. Fashionable, attractive, but conservative.

Until she turned and headed into the party ahead of me, and I was left to pick up my lower jaw from the floor and put my eyes back in my head. Her "conservative" dress left her back bare to the waist. Bare and beautiful.

Now here she was, surprising the hell out of me again. Feet firmly planted, .45 automatic aimed squarely and steadily at Edgar and Tony, her face, her eyes, even her body making it clear she meant business. I sidled out of the line of fire. I'm at least as smart as Tony.

"I said, hands over your heads!" she barked.

They obeyed.

"You, Edgar. Put your gun on the floor very slowly."

He obeyed.

"Take two steps back."

He did.

"You." She pointed to Tony. "Do the same thing."

He hesitated, and I saw him considering alternatives.

"Now!" Her voice echoed in the hollow building.

"You'd better do it, Tony," I said. "She's got a nasty temper."

He complied, reluctantly.

"Hunter, do you think you can get their guns without getting yourself killed?" Her eyes never left Edgar and Tony.

"I'll try." I scooped up the two guns and stood next to her.

"Now, I want you two down on the floor, spread-eagled," she said.

They didn't like the idea, but they did it anyway.

"Hunter, what did I tell you about undesirables?"

I grinned. "What brings you to this neighborhood, Tyler?"

"Charlie called me at home. He tried the office and evidently your home phone isn't working. He filled me in on Edgar. You're in the wrong profession, Hunter. According to Edgar's bank account, chauffeuring is where the money is.

"Anyway, when I got to the office, I heard voices, so I eavesdropped until Edgar started talking about taking a walk. I ran downstairs to the pawn shop and watched until you disappeared into this building. Then I borrowed a gun from the showcase, told them to call the police, and followed you over here. Oh, by the way, you'd better point one of those guns at them. This one isn't loaded."

I chuckled and took aim. Poor Tony looked positively ill.

"You could have just called the police," I pointed out. "Coming over here was dangerous."

"I was afraid they might not get here in time."

"Why, Tyler, you really do care."

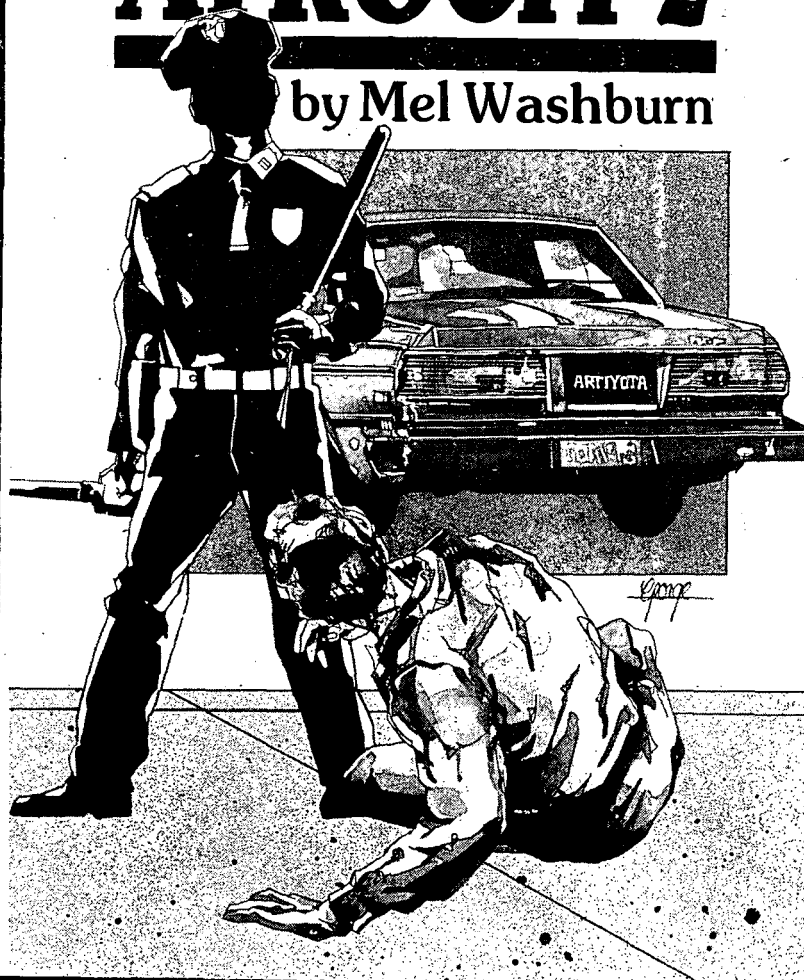
"Of course I care, Hunter. I still haven't been paid this week."

I love that smile.

FICTION

POLICE ATROCITY

by Mel Washburn



Harry Brown felt around in the pockets of his rumpled suit-coat until he found an old cigar, which he stuck in his mouth but did not light because of the oxygen masks being used in the next room. "No smoking here," hissed the nurse at the end of the hallway.

"Yeah, I know," answered Harry. "I was just gonna chew on it." But she only frowned.

Harry put the cigar away. He'd had no idea that Marcia Cunningham would be this long, just looking in on her brother. What could they have to say to each other, with him in a coma? Unless maybe he was coming out of it.

Harry put his ear to the door, but he couldn't hear anything. Then he stepped back just as a young doctor came out of the room. "Say, doc," he said, "has the patient come around a little? Is he talking now?"

The young doctor grimaced. He wore a blue scrub suit, open at the collar and soaked with honest sweat. "Yes, he's conscious, but you can't talk to him."

"I can't?"

"Not without the family's permission."

Harry waited in the hallway another twenty minutes until Marcia Cunningham came out: she was a goodlooking young woman, well turned out in a competent grey business suit, though at the moment she seemed confused and preoccupied. "How's your brother feeling, Miss Cunningham?" Harry asked.

"What? Oh . . . all right, I guess." She touched her forehead nervously with a pale hand.

"The doctor told me he was conscious now." Harry knew a lot about Marcia Cunningham, and what he knew, he admired. She had taken over the family business after the sudden death of her parents some years ago. She'd made a success of the business and had reared her younger brother, though not quite so successfully.

"I'd like to talk to him," Harry told her, "but the doc says I need your permission."

Her eyes narrowed and sharpened. "Why do you want to talk to him?"

"Well, the thing is, when Freddie got hurt, it was two A.M., he was down in the Fourth Ward, which is a sleazy area, to say the least, so I wanted to ask . . ."

"What he was doing down there so late at night?" Her mouth, which had been soft and slack with grief, went thin and determined. "You have some nerve, sergeant. This town's police department

has harassed poor Freddie for years, and now one of your goons has put him in the hospital, so you want . . . ”

“ ‘Goon’ isn’t the word . . . ”

“You want to make it seem Freddie’s fault somehow.”

“Miss Cunningham, I appreciate your loyalty to your brother. Over the years, all the scrapes he’s been in, you always stood by him. I respect that. But now . . . ” He shrugged. “This whole affair last night is so confusing, so senseless. I just want to get the truth.”

She squared her shoulders decisively. “I think the truth is pretty obvious. You don’t need to talk to Freddie.” She walked away.

Harry Brown didn’t like the new police chief, but he tried not to show it. The chief was a thin, intense man who always smelled of mouthwash and often complained about Harry’s cigars. “So what’s the lowdown on this Cunningham business?” he asked, leaning back in his squeaky chair.

“It doesn’t look very good. Tom Whitt almost killed the guy for what seems like no reason at all.”

“So they tell me. You questioned Office Whitt this morning, what did he have to say for himself?”

“He says Cunningham attacked him with a knife.”

“You got the weapon?”

“Yes. It’s a common kitchen knife, there can’t be more than a thousand like it in the city. And to make matters worse, the only fingerprints on it are Whitt’s. He says he took it away from Cunningham in the struggle, then the little peckerwood hit his head on the curbstone.”

“Peckerwood?” The new chief was from back east somewhere. He didn’t understand Midwest dialect yet.

“Yeah, you know, a smartmouth. It’s just an expression.”

“Whitt called the victim a peckerwood?”

“Half the guys in this department have called Cunningham a peckerwood, or something worse, down through the years. Freddie has always been getting in trouble, he’s always obnoxious to the arresting officer. That’s just the way he is.”

“Oh.” The chief frowned thoughtfully. “Well, I’ve been looking at Cunningham’s record, which is long I grant you, but it’s all petty stuff, boyish pranks practically. And now all of a sudden, when an officer stops him for a traffic violation, which he’s already had a hundred of, the guy supposedly turns homicidal. What’s his motive?”

“None I can find.”

"It doesn't take much imagination to put together a completely different picture: this Cunningham was stopped for a traffic offense, he wised off the way he always did, but this time Officer Whitt blew his cork and body-slammed the little peckerwood into the pavement, doing more damage than he'd intended. Then he gets this knife from somewhere, maybe his own lunch bucket, and claims he was attacked with it. How's that sound?"

"It doesn't sound like the Tom Whitt I've known for seven years." Harry thought for a moment. "Maybe we . . ."

"No, we couldn't, whatever you were about to suggest. I want you to turn over what you have on this case, rough edges and all, to the D.A.'s office."

"But the D.A.'s people, they hate this department. They're going to prosecute Whitt for sure. It'll ruin his career, maybe even put him in prison."

"Can't be helped."

"That's not what the old chief would have said." Harry couldn't keep the anger out of his voice. "He stood behind his men."

"He covered up for them, you mean. But I don't work that way. Our department's got two unsolved homicides on its hands. Plus this looney who walked away from the county hospital three days ago, we can't find him anywhere. We don't have the time, the manpower, to waste on Whitt. You let him establish his own innocence, if he can. Am I clear?"

"Very clear."

Tom Whitt lived on the south side of town in a three-bedroom ranch house, the kind that came already supplied with some wilted shrubbery in the front, a plywood doghouse in the back, and a twenty-year mortgage you could pay off quite easily if you and your wife both worked full-time jobs.

"Yes, who is it?" a hollow voice called out from deep within the darkened house when Harry rang the front doorbell.

"It's me, Harry Brown!" Harry shouted through the screen door. "I gotta talk to you again."

"Come on in."

The front room was a tidy showplace of family photos and discount furniture; the kitchen was in post-breakfast disarray; and in the back room, amid a chaos of children's toys, Ted Whitt lay unhappily in his Reclinolounger, staring at the television. "Sorry about the mess," he said dully. "The wife's at work. The kids are at her mother's. I guess I just didn't feel like picking up." He was

a big, redheaded man, strong but gentle, and normally full of energy, though today he seemed limp and dragged out.

"It's okay, Tom. I just came over to tell you, the chief's going to hand your case over to the D.A."

"Did Cunningham die or something?" Whitt asked sadly.

"No, I guess he'll be all right."

"Gee, that's a relief."

"But the D.A.'s probably going to call it aggravated assault, maybe attempted murder."

Whitt moaned involuntarily.

"So, I want to ask, can you think of any reason why Cunningham attacked you? Any motive?"

"Well, let me see . . . he got out of the car. I looked inside. 'What's in the sack?' I asked him—because he had a grocery sack on the front seat—and then he jumped all over me." Whitt brightened hopefully. "So it must have been something in the sack! I never got a chance to look inside it. What was there, drugs or something he was afraid I'd find?"

"No, there was just ordinary groceries."

"Oh." Whitt turned dull and hopeless again. "Well, that's all I can think of." Thick, round tears began to roll down his cheeks.

"You better get yourself a lawyer," Harry Brown advised him.

"What would be the use?"

"Yeah, sure," Harry thought as he drove back downtown. "Let Whitt establish his own innocence, the chief says. Fat chance of that. The guy's just paralyzed with worry and despair, is all."

An hour later, Harry was parked across the street from an office building, watching the raindrops stream across his windshield and waiting for Marcia Cunningham to come out the front door. Having eaten both his sandwiches already and emptied his thermos of coffee, he was thinking about lighting up his cigar when someone tapped loudly on the rear window of the car.

It was Marcia Cunningham, all wrapped up in a raincoat and protecting her hair with a clear plastic umbrella. Harry put on his yellow slicker and got out of the car to talk to her.

"What's the big idea?" she asked him.

"No idea at all."

She laughed angrily. "I can almost believe that, coming from you."

"Thanks."

"But I'm inclined to believe instead that you're shadowing me."

So I'm going inside to call my lawyer. And he's going to call your chief. And if you or any of your flat-footed friends come within a mile of me, I'll sue you for harassment and take your badge away."

"Now, Miss Cunningham . . ." Harry began.

But she just kicked him in the shin and walked away.

The chief stuck his head out of his office door as Harry walked past, his wet shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor. "Stay away from that Cunningham woman, Brown, that's an order."

"But I've got an idea her brother told her something at the hospital. Something important."

"And I've got an idea, too. It involves early retirement for you, on a very small pension. So just stay away from her, will you?"

When he got back to his desk, Harry found Sam Fernese, the most aggressive of the D.A.'s assistants, sitting in his chair, reading the Whitt/Cunningham file. "How'd you get that out of my desk?" Harry asked darkly.

Fernese just smiled. "The chief said you were bringing this over to us, but I figured I'd save you the trip." He flipped casually through the official reports. "Things don't look very bright for Brother Whitt. Has he got himself an attorney yet?"

"I don't think so."

"Going to let his innocence speak for itself?" Fernese asked mockingly. "Good decision." He stuffed the report back into its manila envelope.

"Just a minute, Sam, will you?" Harry pleaded. "I haven't finished with that investigation yet."

"Oh yes you have."

"Well, come on, wait. At least let me read the inventory of those groceries Cunningham had in the car with him."

Fernese put the file in his briefcase and snapped it shut. "You don't remember? It was junk food. Two kinds of breakfast cereal, a box of little doughnuts, some candy, soda pop, white bread, and lunch meat."

"Like he was going camping or something?"

"Yeah, or like he was a typical Country Club bachelor, too lazy to cook, too dumb to eat what's good for him."

"Maybe so."

Harry told the desk sergeant he was taking the afternoon off sick; then he went home and put on some grubby clothes, tucking his .38 Special into his waistband and pinning his badge inside his coat. He got into his rusty old pickup, which he used mostly for

weekend fishing trips, and drove over to the Cunningham Building, parking down the street.

Later, just after dark, Marcia Cunningham drove past him in her shiny, bright yellow Buick. "This could be it," thought Harry as he followed her to a small grocery store in the Fourth Ward.

Marcia Cunningham was glad to be outside again; the bitter wind and the chilling rain felt almost refreshing after the dank atmosphere of the crowded little grocery. She looked around once more, as she put the groceries into her car, for some sign of a police vehicle, but there wasn't any. Apparently that Sergeant Brown was more timid than he seemed: one phone call to the chief had been enough to discourage him.

Slowly she drove down the crumbling, trash-strewn pavements of the Fourth Ward, barely making her way between the rows of shot-down cars that lined the curbs on either side. With difficulty, because of the rain and because half the street lamps were burnt out, she found Linn Street and headed south, picking out an occasional street number on the front of a ragged, scurvy old house with a half-dozen tin mailboxes tacked up around the front door and an abandoned car or a heap of old tires in the front yard.

Harry Brown, meanwhile, had switched the key on and off a dozen times, but the engine wouldn't turn over. It just whined and stalled. "Damn!" he said furiously as he climbed out of the pickup and slammed its rusty door. Angry and frustrated, he walked head-down into the wind and rain, across the street to the grocery store. "I hope they have a phone in this crummy place."

Marcia drove past the house several times and then parked outside, watching a while for any sign of life and seeing none. Yet this was the address.

Inside, the house was empty except for a broken, dusty chair and a stack of soggy newspapers in the front room. Marcia walked back to the kitchen and opened the cellar door. "Oh, my goodness!" she cried as the odor of damp earth and something else rolled up the stairs to engulf her, almost choking her. Somewhere down below, small rodents scurried about with a sound like dry leaves.

"Just walk on down the stairs," a hoarse voice whispered in her ear.

"I . . . I've got your groceries," she said breathlessly. "Can't I just leave them here?"

"No, you can't. You got to go downstairs."

"I . . . Freddie . . . you're his friend, he said."

The voice snickered. "Him and me was never really close." Cold fingers gripped her neck. "As for yourself, though; I think I can get real chummy." He shoved her roughly down the stairs, maliciously, so that she stumbled and fell the last couple of feet.

The floor was chill and slimy; the air was as musty as a grave. He lit a candle. "Romantic, huh?" His face was dead white, narrowish, all angles, with a black stubble of beard on the chin. His two eyes reflected the candle—two flickering yellow points of light in the gloom.

He drew a long, gleaming knife from its sheath.

"Better put that away, brother," said a man in grubby clothes as he came down the stairs. "And no sudden moves, okay? Or I'll shoot big holes in your poor, crazy head." And then Marcia fainted.

"He and Freddie had done some bizarre things together," she told Harry the next day. "Wicked things that even I had never guessed at. And Freddie was afraid it would all come out if this madman was recaptured."

"So Freddie hid him in that house."

"Yes. And he was taking food over there when the police car stopped him. Freddie went hysterical and attacked the officer."

"Then, later, in the hospital room, he told you the story and asked for your help?"

"He asked and I refused. Then he begged. What could I do?" She touched her throat, where the cold fingers of death had gripped.

Harry guessed her thought. "You had a close call. Especially when I lost track of you for a while."

"And how did you find me again?"

"Easy enough. You were driving the only car in the Fourth Ward worth more than a few hundred dollars. I had a couple of squad cars go looking for it, then I moved in."

"You were clever."

"Yeah, I was." Harry grinned modestly. "And tenacious and brave."

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FICTION

THE OLDEST TRICK IN THE BOOK

by John H. Dirckx



Illustration by Nicola Cuti

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The vote to accept Reverend Halcomb into the Linnmere Crime and Detection Club was by no means unanimous. Some of the members thought the presence of a man of the cloth at our fortnightly meetings would put a damper on the frequently racy discussions of grisly axe murders and lurid *crimes passionels* of the past and present. Others perhaps hoped for such a result. In any event, he got in. By the way, I'm Rowena Dill, and I have very little to do with this story except that I'm telling it.

Reverend Halcomb was a bright-eyed, earnest man, a trifle shy and just going bald on top. He had been in Linnmere only a few weeks as the pastor of St. Paul's when Mr. Pettijohn, the barber, sponsored his application for membership in our club. I, for one, wondered whether the minister might not have been misled about the nature of the organization, perhaps thinking that we assembled regularly to discuss such things as the minutiae of the Sherlock Holmes saga and the disappearance of Judge Crater. The club did start out that way, but such is the perversity of human nature that it evolved over the years into a hotbed of gossip, concerned less with the doings of film stars and political figures than with

those of the inhabitants of Linnmere.

At the first meeting Reverend Halcomb attended, Mrs. North read a paper on celebrated murder cases in which the bodies were never found. She did it very well, but as always her delivery was a little florid for my taste. Mrs. North is a woman of more than ample girth who affects tweed suits and heavy, clanking jewelry. Her gestures, as Mr. Dawson once remarked, remind one of the struggles of a large insect to get out of a small bottle.

After the talk, Reverend Halcomb asked a number of questions and offered one or two comments which I thought remarkably to the point, though Mrs. North didn't seem to like them much. Any fears we might have had about his suitability as a member of the club were soon laid to rest. He seemed to be well up on the subject of murder and not the least bit squeamish about confronting its nastier aspects. I began to fear for his standing in the community if the word got abroad that he took so keen an interest in bloodstained hammers and dismembered corpses.

Later, over coffee, the conversation came round, as it always did, to local affairs. No representative of the official police was a member of our club—we'd seen to that early

on—and so we were obliged to base our judgments on the observations and deductions of the members. But the members, as you may have surmised, were a very observing and deducing crowd.

Inevitably, someone brought up the Morvens, who had been a principal article of village news since their appearance in Linnere a month or so before. Mr. Morven—or rather Dr. Morven, for so he styled himself—had taken a year's lease on the Bainbridge property, a tall old house near the top of the hill overlooking the village. He told Mr. Blevins, the realtor who handled the deal, that he and his wife were looking forward to enjoying the peace and seclusion of village life.

Soon the movers arrived with two van-loads of furniture and household goods. Despite the most diligent inquiries, all the neighbors could learn was that the family was moving from somewhere out west. Dr. Morven was very much in evidence, directing the movers and ordering groceries and supplies from local tradesmen, and so was the trim housemaid he'd brought with him. But of Mrs. Morven there was no sign.

Not, that is, until the moving was finished and a gardener had been hired from the village to clear the garden of weeds and rubbish and set out beds of pan-

sies and marigolds before the parlor window. Then at last the lady of the house arrived. Gaunt, silent, and heavily veiled, she was brought one evening from points unknown by Dr. Morven in his car, and helped, not to say carried, into the house by the doctor and the maid. It was plain that she was an invalid, and equally plain that some mystery surrounded the household, where the lights often burned behind drawn blinds far into the night, and all callers were politely repulsed.

"I don't believe he's a doctor at all," said Mr. Dawson, the pharmacist, who knows all there is to know about poisons. "He was in the drugstore last week, and when I happened to remark that the latest research on bio-flavonoids looked very promising, he didn't seem to know what I was talking about. Thought it was something to do with automobiles."

"Not buying anything interesting, I don't suppose?" asked Mr. Pettijohn.

The pharmacist eyed the carpet. "Just corn plasters," he said.

"He hasn't *actually claimed* to be a medical man, has he?" demanded Mrs. North, talking in italics as usual. "You remember Dr. Lattimer, who used to rent the Frenches' carriage house every summer. We all thought he was a *doctor doctor*

until Mrs. McCartney asked him about her lumbago and learned, to her *stupefaction*, that he was a professor of Roman law. Why, a man who calls himself 'doctor' might even turn out to be a *clergyman*."

She made it sound like a chance remark, but we who knew our Mrs. North saw clearly enough what she was driving at. For Reverend Halcomb was one of only three persons who were known to have seen the mysterious Mrs. Morven at close range—the others being the gardener and a telephone installer:

After what she'd just said, it seemed perfectly natural for her to turn to the minister and ask, "I don't suppose *you'd* know what sort of a doctor he is, eh?"

"Oh, the medical sort, I should say, definitely," replied Reverend Halcomb without hesitation. "Otherwise he'd have had Dr. Chamberlin in to see the lady by now. She's in a very poor state of health."

"It's a little strange, all the same," said Mrs. Morland, the schoolteacher, "that he should take the responsibility of treating his own wife."

"Your visit there was professional, of course, Reverend Halcomb," pursued Mrs. North, "and we shouldn't wish to ask you for information imparted in confidence." Her tone made it clear that that was exactly what we

all did wish to do. "But there seems to be a good deal of mystery about these people. Dr. Morven can't be a day over forty. If he is a medical man, why doesn't he practice? He can't devote all his time to looking after a sick wife, and as busy as Dr. Chamberlin is, he wouldn't mind the competition."

"As you say, I mustn't violate a confidence," replied the minister. He paused and grew thoughtful. "There is something curious about the Morvens, though, truly enough—a harmless deception, I fancy. The oldest trick in the book, one might call it." His eye took on an odd gleam, signifying something between archness and merriment, but not another word would he say about the Morvens.

As the weeks went by, the mystery deepened and took on a sinister tinge. First a strange visitor arrived in a car with New York license plates and spent a day and a night at the Morven house.

According to rumor, he was tall, middle-aged, and expensively dressed, with only a pair of dark and furtive eyes showing between the brim of his hat and his rather opulent silk scarf.

This visit was duly noted by

the village gossips, who were divided in their opinion as to its significance. A few believed that the man from New York was some crony of the doctor's, while the majority inclined to the view that he was a lawyer who had come to draft Mrs. Morven's will.

It was scarcely a week afterward that the grocer's boy found Dr. Morven and the maid embracing in the pantry, and put himself three-quarters of an hour behind in his deliveries by skipping home to tell his two elder brothers. "Embracing" is not exactly the word he used, but it will have to do here.

The tale swept through the village like influenza, and by nightfall there was scarcely a citizen of Linmere above the age of ten who was not perfectly certain that Dr. Morven, if he *was* a doctor, was slowly poisoning his wife for the sake of her money, and disporting himself with the maid while his victim's life ebbed away.

The maid, whose name was Elspeth, seldom appeared in public, as the doctor did most of the shopping. Not quite pretty and not quite young, she was nonetheless more attractive than the common run of household help, and a good deal younger than Mrs. Morven.

But then so, according to popular opinion, was Dr. Morven.

Summer came and went. The Morven affair settled down into just another village scandal and receded into the background as matters of greater moment came to occupy public attention. Nothing much happened except that the mysterious visitor made two more appearances. Still the suspense remained: would the lady eventually succumb to whatever deadly substance the doctor was putting into her food—with the connivance, of course, of the maid? More important, would they get away with it?

The climax came so abruptly that it was past before most of us knew anything about it. Suddenly the movers were taking things away again, "to storage," as they said. Of the Morvens and their maid there was not a trace. But Mr. Blevins, the realtor, let it be known that Mrs. Morven had passed away three days previously and that a hearse had come all the way from New York that same night to take her body there for burial.

At the next meeting of the Linmere Crime and Detection Club there was only the merest pretense of a formal program. Not a single member was absent, and Reverend Halcomb had to put back the folding doors between his parlor and dining room to accommodate us

all, for it was his turn to host the meeting at the rectory.

Nothing daunted by the sacred precincts, Mrs. North brought up the death of Mrs. Morven at the earliest possible moment, and expressed the view that the club should petition the authorities to exhume the unfortunate lady and analyze her remains for every known poison.

"I shouldn't waste my time," observed Mr. Burns from his perch on the window seat in the parlor.

Mr. Burns is a writer who got into the club on the strength of one or two mystery stories published years ago, before he hit his stride as a novelist of the cheap and sentimental school. He is the dullest person imaginable, and always looks at one as if he were planning to put one into his next book in the character of a ruthless vixen or a private nurse addicted to cocaine.

"I take two New York papers besides the *Times*," he said, "and there has been no notice of the death or burial of anyone named Mrs. Morven."

"Perhaps she's been cremated!" said Mr. Dawson, aghast at his own suggestion.

"... Or the cremation of any such person," added Mr. Burns.

"Why, that makes it all the more suspicious!" cried Mrs. North. "Either this doctor chap

lied when he told Mr. Blevins his wife would be buried in New York, or he's been using a false name."

"Steady on," said Mr. Leedy, a retired lawyer who often has to damp the ardor of the group with cold legal facts. "Since before Adam Bainbridge died, that property has been held in trust by the bank. Blevins couldn't have let the property without being sure of the lessee's bona fides. I think we can take it as read that Morven is the right name."

"Reverend Halcomb!" exclaimed Mrs. North. "You know something about this. Come, come, the lady's dead and her husband's gone away. Where's the harm in setting the record straight?"

The minister was just handing around coffee cups, including several borrowed from a neighbor. When he had fulfilled the duties of host, he resumed his elbow chair with its back to the empty grate, and stirring his own coffee meditatively, he said, "I believe it might be the lesser of two evils if I did disclose Dr. Morven's secret."

"Was it poison?" cried someone impulsively from a corner of the dining room.

"Oh, dear, no." The minister's tone was quiet but ever so slightly reproachful. "You may be assured that the lady died a natural death."

"No, you don't, reverend," said Mrs. North. "You admitted long ago that there was some knavery afoot in that house. 'The oldest trick in the book,' you called it. Now you say Mrs. Morven died a natural death, and that it's the most natural thing in the world for her husband to carry on with the maid while she's dying this natural death, and perfectly natural, too, for him to snatch the body away to New York in the middle of the night." Mrs. North was not in one of her taciturn moods that evening.

"I didn't really say quite all that," objected Reverend Halcomb. "Of course, you don't want me preaching sermons out of church, but I think—I really think—that it's a case of not enough Bible-reading with all of you."

Raising his hand to quell the murmur of surprise and bewilderment that met this remark, he proceeded to explain. "You've just reminded me, Mrs. North, that I said Dr. Morven was up to the oldest trick in the book. May I remind *you* that for a clergyman there is only one book that deserves to be called 'the book'?"

He half-turned in his seat and lifted down a well-worn copy of the Authorized Version from the mantelpiece. "The Old Testament simply teems with cases of deceit and disguise and

fraud," he mused, as he turned over the pages. "Just think of Jacob tricking Isaac, of Jacob and Rachel each putting one over on Laban. Remember Joseph and his brothers, Delilah and Samson . . ."

A few nodded sagely, and someone quite close to him murmured, "Potiphar's wife," but he pretended not to notice.

"To find the *oldest* trick in the Book, one has to look rather early in Genesis. Ah, here it is—Chapter Twelve. Abram traveled from Canaan to Egypt, and in order to prevent the Egyptians from murdering him for his wife's sake, he pretended she wasn't his wife. And later he pulled exactly the same trick on Abimelech of Gerar." He closed the book and started round the room again with the coffee pot.

"But—but I don't see the connection at all," sputtered Mrs. North. "This Morven person didn't pretend any such thing!"

"He did, though," rejoined Reverend Halcomb from the middle of the dining room. "He pretended he wasn't married to the maid—but he was."

"Dear God!" cried Mr. Dawson, in pious indignation rather than blasphemy. "A bigamist!"

"Not at all," chided Reverend Halcomb. "The invalid lady wasn't the doctor's wife, only his patient. Moreover, he never said she was his wife. That was

all the result of Mr. Blevins' conjectures, ratified by village gossip." He went back to his chair and poured the last of the coffee into his own cup, the cynosure of all eyes.

"Well, who was she, then, if she wasn't Mrs. Morven?" asked three or four people at once.

"Rosalind Bainbridge was her name when she lived in Linmere as a child," said the minister. "She was born in the very house where she died. Years ago she moved away, married well, and in the course of time became a wealthy widow. When she fell victim to a progressive and incurable nervous disorder, she arranged to spend the final months of her life in her childhood home. And she made her medical advisor, Dr. Morven, her principal heir on condition that he should close his practice and devote all his time to her care. It was by her wish that her identity was not made known in the village."

"I want to ask only one question," said Mr. Haeckl, the cabinetmaker, who reads Kant in German on Sunday mornings instead of going to church. "Is this fact, known fact, or just guessing?"

"Pure fact, so far as I know," replied the clergyman. "Dr.

Morven explained the state of affairs to me as soon as he arrived here with his patient. I was to follow my own discretion about revealing it to others."

"Who was that shifty-looking chap who used to visit from New York?" asked Mr. Pettijohn. "Do you know that?"

"I do. As his patient's heir, Dr. Morven was in no position to sign her death certificate. The visitor was Dr. August Lenark, a famous nerve specialist, who came from time to time to observe the progress of her illness."

"Reverend Halcomb!" bubbled Mrs. North, trembling with enthusiasm. "You must set to work at once on a paper for us about all that Old Testament skullduggery and fraud. Call it 'Murder and Mayhem in Holy Scripture.' One thing I confess still escapes me. If everything was fair and square and above-board with Dr. Morven, why did he resort to this book-of-Genesis business, pretending the maid wasn't his wife, and letting us all think the other woman was?"

"Why, the reason is fairly obvious, I think," said the minister, with his shy, donnish smile. "He wanted to keep the villagers from gossiping."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

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The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION



RAGS AND STONES

by
Louis
Weinstein

Illustration by John Jinks

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Phil Mandel is my name, and the story of how Pat O'Hara came to be my ace in the hole began one morning about fifteen years ago when my investigation of some cargo missing from a dinky old Brooklyn pier ran into a stone wall. I'd met Pat on the handball courts two or three years before. He was well into his fifties then, but the mean game he played quickly chased away any ideas I had about taking it easy on him. His game combined power with finesse and amazing footwork. And it didn't take me long to realize his headwork matched his footwork. Pat was still on the job then as a City of New York dockmaster, so he came by his astonishing knowledge of the New York waterfront naturally. But he also knew New York City, present and past, inside out, going back to the days when the Dutch hid from the Indians behind a big wall across lower Manhattan. His shrewd comments and suggestions about certain of my cases—I am a private investigator—had already helped point me in the right direction a few times. He'd volunteered his help any time I wanted it, all I had to do was ask.

So that morning at Pier 197, a relic of the pre-container era, it took me all of ten minutes to decide this was as good a time as any to take him up on his

offer. I was floundering, unable in all the hubbub to get direct answers to routine questions. Why they were making such a fuss over the missing drums—two out of a sizable shipment of some kind of African ore—that had disappeared from the street outside the pier eluded me. The entire pier area was crawling with assorted investigators.

I crossed over to a restaurant-bar called Billy's, opposite the pier, and called Pat's office at the number he'd given me.

"Pat," I said when they put him on the phone, "I've got a little problem that sounds like it's right in your back yard." I told him something about it and where I was.

"Right in my back yard?" He chuckled. "Phil, you couldn't have said it any better. Tell you what. I'm leaving the office now. Meet me at the Fern Street pier, three blocks up the line."

About eleven Pat's long, lean frame came into view. He was striding along like a man half his age and in a dark suit instead of the sweatshirt, floppy old pants; and sneakers I was used to seeing him in. He looked very businesslike.

I fell in alongside him as, bulkhead to our right, we headed toward Pier 197.

"Tell me about it," Pat said, "from the beginning."

"About a quarter past ten, the insurance company gave

me a call," I said. "A routine thing, I thought, until I got to the pier and found myself in the middle of a lawmen's convention. The Feds are in an uproar. The big man in charge practically told me to get lost."

"I suppose they don't want anyone interfering with their handling of the investigation," Pat said. "Who discovered the drums were missing?"

"The delivery clerk, around nine thirty. He came up with sixty-six instead of the sixty-eight checked in yesterday afternoon. I heard them say they were going to watch for the dockmaster, see what kind of count he got."

"Misdirected effort," Pat said, grabbing my arm to jerk me out of the way of a big semi barreling down the cobblestone roadway. "Take it from me, Phil, the dockmaster can't tell them anything that will help."

"Well, the guy running around dishing out orders seems to think it's important. A man named Trevens, or something like that."

"What's he look like?" Pat seemed interested.

"A big guy, almost as big as me. Big head. Shaggy black hair, a lot of gray in it. Brown eyes. Reminded me of a mastiff. Don't let the Groucho mustache fool you. He's all business, takes himself seriously."

"It couldn't by any chance be Evans?" Pat asked.

"Might have been," I shrugged. "He wasn't much help to me, so I didn't stick around."

"Stand by. The fun's just starting," Pat said.

About a hundred and fifty feet ahead of us, next to a line of waiting trucks, a group of men was standing. I recognized the pier superintendent, Captain Allen, and the delivery clerk, Joe Geraghty. I'd met both earlier. The Federal big wheel was there, with a tall, clean-cut, younger man at his side.

"That's Evans all right—my old pal, Clint Evans. It's heavy, Phil. Only big-league trouble could bring Evans to this forsaken corner of Brooklyn. The young fellow with him is one of his greyhounds. He's never without them."

Pat and I approached, and I heard Allen say to Evans, "Here's the dockmaster now."

I noticed again how rumpled Evans seemed. Dark tweed jacket straining at the shoulders and the buttons about to pop; tan slacks hanging baggily; loafers scuffed; solid yellow sport shirt open at the throat, exposing the bear-furry chest; face stubbled.

"Pat, this is Mr. Evans, from Washington. We've got a serious problem," Allen said.

"I've already had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Evans," Pat gave him a nod. "And I know you've got a problem. Phil here,

Mr. Mandel, was kind enough to tell me something about it."

"O'Hara," Evans' mouth worked as if he were sucking a lemon, "of all the dockmasters floating around this town I might have guessed it'd be you. You're like a bad penny. You have a knack of turning up where there's trouble, and poking your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Must be the luck of the Irish," Pat said mildly. "Hello, Joe," he greeted Geraghty. "What are you looking so worried about? Your mother-in-law move in with you?"

Before Geraghty could answer, Evans said sharply, "O'Hara, we don't have time for your malarkey."

I gathered that Pat's dealings with Evans hadn't endeared him to the man, and vice versa.

"What an honor, a delegation like this for a plain old dockmaster like me," Pat said with mock humility. "Shoot. I'm ready to help any way I can."

"What we want from you are a few straight answers," Evans said belligerently. "How many drums did you count in the street yesterday?" He jabbed a finger toward the bulkhead past the far side of the pier.

"Let me see." Pat consulted a small black notebook. "Make it around sixty-seven. Yes. That's what I got."

"Oh oh," Geraghty groaned.

"Sixty-seven?" Evans sucked

another lemon. "Around sixty-seven? You're not much help. You sure it wasn't sixty-eight or sixty-six?"

"Sorry to disappoint you," Pat said. "I could be off one or two, either way. My job doesn't call for me to be one hundred percent scientifically accurate. For my purposes, a rough count and a rough average weight per drum is good enough. At ten cents a ton a day, it's no big deal if I'm a little off."

"Pretty sloppy," Evans went at him. "Does your commissioner know how slipshod you are?"

"The commissioner?" Pat laughed. "Commissioner Turner has important things to worry about—leasing piers, planning new developments, calls from Washington. You're talking about pennies."

I marveled at Pat's forbearance. With better than thirty years on the waterfront behind him, Pat didn't need Evans to tell him how to handle his job. If he was angry, he had the good sense to hold his tongue. Pat was obligated to cooperate with Federal officials, even a bristly one like Evans.

"Okay, O'Hara, what time was this when you got your half-ass count? If you can remember."

"Just before three thirty." Pat ignored the sarcasm.

"That helps," Allen said.

"How does it help?" Evans

snapped. He was consistent. He treated everyone the same: miserably.

"The way I see it," Allen explained, "if Pat says he got sixty-seven, he must have missed one, so all sixty-eight were still there when he made his check."

"Okay," Evans conceded. "Maybe it does help a little. Maybe all sixty-eight did come off the ship."

"My figures had to be right," Geraghty insisted. "Morelli is a top checker, very accurate. If he says there were sixty-eight, there were sixty-eight. He wouldn't try anything funny."

"That remains to be seen," Evans said. I wondered if he ever believed anyone. "What time did Morelli get done checking the drums through?"

"His sheet says a quarter to three," Geraghty said.

"So it looks as if the theft happened some time after three thirty yesterday and before nine thirty this morning. That's when you made your check, right, Geraghty?"

"Right. That's when I discovered the shortage."

"Do you make it a practice to check all the cargo?"

"No," Geraghty said. "We don't check anything else."

"We made this check because of the nature of the cargo," Allen explained. "But ordinarily we don't have to worry about any heavy, bulky stuff left out

on the street. No one can walk off with a loaded fifty-five gallon drum in his hip pocket."

"Except whoever waltzed off with these two drums," Evans said. He turned to Pat. "Do you happen to know what's in these drums?"

"Cobaltite. Comes through here all the time."

"That's right. Cobaltite. Do you know what it actually is?" He gave Pat a level stare.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Pat said. "It's cobalt ore, unrefined, with other metals mixed in. Some copper. Maybe a trace of silver."

"You seem to be pretty well informed, O'Hara." Too well informed, Evans' voice hinted darkly. "They don't ship it all the way from Africa in this bulk form because they're interested in squeezing five dollars' worth of silver out of it. I don't suppose there's any need to tell you what cobalt is all about."

"Something to do with atomic bombs," Pat said. "That's no deep secret. The dirty bomb. Highly radioactive."

"Highly effective," Evans corrected. "That's the point. A highly effective weapon. That's what makes cobalt so important to national security."

"I'm not arguing," Pat said. "I don't know that much about it."

"Hah," Evans laughed skeptically. "O'Hara, you better give me your phone number again."

Both of them—office and home. Don't leave the house without letting me know where you can be reached, and don't wander too far away."

"I won't leave the country either," Pat said.

"You, too," Evans said to me. "I want to know where I can reach you in a hurry."

There I was, guilty of association with Pat.

"One thing more, O'Hara," Evans said. "You're supposed to have a sharp eye. Have you seen anyone suspicious hanging around the neighborhood lately? If you have, spill it now, not when you get around to remembering."

"I wasn't particularly on the lookout." Pat gave Evans a little smile. "But no Vemarians. No bankers."

Evans looked for an instant as if his best friend had stabbed him in the solar plexus with an ice pick.

"Don't get flip with me," he said angrily. "You wouldn't see an elephant if it was stepping on your toes. If anything happens to occur to you later, be damned sure to let me know."

Evans took his greyhound aside and spoke a few words to him, then disappeared into the pier with Allen. The greyhound went off in a different direction.

"It's a real crock," Geraghty said, heading for the pier. "Who the hell would want a ton of cobalt ore? What could they do

with it, eat it for breakfast?"

"What's with you and Evans?" I asked Pat. "What's this Vemarian business? And is he always this way?"

"A little later, when I finish my cargo count, I'll tell you all you'll ever want to know about Evans, Vemarians, and some other things he doesn't like to be reminded of."

The street around the pier was still filled with assorted types in business suits. Most of them shot inquiring glances at us. Pat's eyes ran appraisingly over the crates, pipes, and bundles of steel rods scattered along the bulkhead. At the south side of the pier a dull gray freighter hogged most of the pier's length, which I judged to be about five hundred feet.

"Dammit, Pat," I said, "I should think he'd welcome your help. Any help he can get."

"Evans doesn't need me and my ideas, or you and your ideas. Evans doesn't believe we could have any ideas worth listening to. Let's have a look at the scene of the crime."

As we passed the pier Pat said, "Notice how narrow it is. Not much floor space inside. And those bulkhead sheds that quit right after they start. All the deck space is taken up with baled rubber, sisal, coffee sacks, bagged spices—cargo that has to be kept under cover. So they move the drums onto the street, out of the way of traffic or

cargo-handling operations. As Allen said, the drums are too heavy—hundreds of pounds—to be taken by an ordinary thief.”

“I wouldn’t want to try it.” I pushed against one of them. There was nothing special about them—ordinary, beat-up, fifty-five gallon, flat-lidded drums of the kind used for oil and bulk chemicals. The three irregular rows began a few feet in from the bulkhead wall.

“The ore’s not soluble in water,” Pat went on. “Cold and heat won’t damage it. To look at it, you’d think it was ordinary stones. It’s rare all right, comparatively, but it has no immediate market value. How many buyers can there be for anything so specialized, even in a black market?”

“What makes it so valuable?” I asked. “What’s all the commotion about?”

“The big bomb—the search for the big bomb,” Pat said. “The military is out to develop the most frightening atomic weapon human ingenuity can come up with, the super-deterrent that will keep Uncle Sam’s enemies quaking in their boots. That’s the ‘dirty’ cobalt bomb. It fills the bill perfectly.”

“Dirty?” I asked.

“Dirty in this case means the cobalt used in the bomb’s casing turns highly radioactive as the fissionable material goes boom. To almost anyone not in the atomic bomb business, the co-

baltite, or cobalt ore, is not of tremendous value. So there’s no incentive to steal it. All the other uses of cobalt are highly specialized and require complicated technology. What’s more, cobalt ore, from whatever source, is carefully monitored as to its disposition and use. They want to know how much of it there is, and where it is, and what it’s being used for, at all times.”

All the while Pat was busy counting the drums.

“Then you’d think they’d be more particular about where they put it,” I said. “The house-keeping here is atrocious. Look at all that trash, and the cars squeezed in every which way. What’s that dumpster doing there?”

A monster of a dumpster, Hambrun Carting painted on its side, squatted on the street just about where the bulkhead shed ended.

“No mystery about that. Hambrun is a private sanitation company. They have a contract for trash removal with the pier tenant, Congo Steamship.

“Sixty-six,” Pat finished his count. “Notice anything unusual?”

“There’s a dredge pulling in alongside the ship.”

“A diver’ll be along soon, too. You don’t know Evans. He won’t rest until that cobalt is back in the vault. Have you noticed anything else?”

"Can't say that I have."

"Here's what I mean." Pat ran a hand over the top of the nearest drum. His hand came away sooty, and he sniffed at it. He bent over to examine the cobblestones. He pointed to patches of fine, flaky black ash. "Burned newspaper, wouldn't you say? And notice how wet the pavement is?" He dipped a toe into a small puddle by way of illustration. "Kind of odd, considering it hasn't rained all week . . . Come on, we'll have lunch at Billy's. Great food at a great price."

Over a tasty lunch we talked in the most innocent way about the Yankees' slump. A wise precaution, since the young fellow in a brown suit dawdling over coffee in the next booth was working just a little too hard at not being interested in our conversation. We finished eating. Before paying the check, I went to the washroom. Brown Suit ambled in behind me. When I came out Pat was standing near the register, chatting with Billy, a chunky, square-faced man with a shock of curly white hair.

"Thanks," I heard Pat saying to Billy. "I appreciate it. This business shouldn't take long to wrap up."

"Any time, Pat," Billy said.

As we went through the door to the street, Brown Suit was paying his check.

In the street, Pat said to me, "You stick with me while I finish going through the district. Then we'll come back here—I'll need more details for my report, and a couple of things need checking. You notice our tail isn't making much effort to stay invisible. That's just Evans, worrying me a little."

We were moseying along the water's edge, past the old ferry terminal.

"The man's got to be paranoid, thinking you and I could be involved," I said. "What the devil's the matter with him?"

"Let me tell you about the almighty Evans, and Four Continents Shipping Company, and the orphan cargo—nothing spectacular, just forty bales of rags—that got left behind on a pier about two years ago. Four Continents is out of business under that name, taken over by another company in a merger. But at the time they were what the name implied, and more. They would literally carry almost anything anywhere. That included many items frowned on by the folks in Washington, and ports of call that more conservative, or timid, lines wouldn't touch. Mind you, Four Continents didn't downright defy the authorities, but it took more than frowns or verbal slaps on the wrist to back them off. They ran blockades, risked mined waters, routinely delivered cargos to belligerents in war zones, both sides if they

could drum up the business. That's where the fat, fast bucks were, and principles be damned.

"Shortly before the orphan cargo incident, Four Continents had been kicked around by the media for doing business in a roundabout way with a nation considered hostile to the United States."

"I remember it vaguely," I said.

Before going on Pat paused on a short unshedded pier to record a half dozen gravel barges tied up there.

"What was involved was the sneaky transshipment of electronics equipment, not run of the mill stuff but certain components that could, in the opinion of a number of nervous, outraged legislators, be used in sophisticated missile guidance systems. They screamed about opportunism, cynicism, disloyalty, and even treason before some spoilsport pointed out that these components were not secret, important, or exclusively of American manufacture but could be obtained freely in the international market from at least a half dozen foreign sources. That knowledge, of course, didn't alter one fact that had come to light. Shipments were being mislabeled, raising the bigger question: If electronics equipment was being shipped in big wooden crates marked 'farm machinery,' what other masquerades could be taking

place in Four Continents ships' manifests? So Uncle Sam was keeping a sharp eye on them.

"At the time, you remember, Vemaria was fighting to come into existence against the larger, hostile nations that hemmed it in. Vemaria had little outside help. Most nations of the world stood aloof, choosing not to take sides for fear of becoming embroiled in the continuing struggle between the two leading world powers. The United States' declared policy was strict neutrality. It supported neither side and supplied arms to neither.

"Then it happened that when a Four Continents freighter, the *Dardanella*, left port from Pier 383 in Brooklyn on a voyage whose itinerary included a call at a Vemarian port, an item of cargo was left behind on the pier. I was the district dockmaster—two districts up from this one—and so was responsible for charging the proper wharfage fee, based on the ship's net tonnage, and seeing to it that all provisions of the permit were lived up to.

"The cargo left behind seemed innocuous—forty bundles of tightly-compressed, metal-banded rags, the bundles roughly cubic and about six feet on each side. But at the last minute Customs had stepped in and ordered the bales taken off the ship.

"The reason? Suspicion that

hidden away inside the bales were arms for Vemaria—rifles, submachine guns, perhaps some ammunition. Presumably some Federal agency got wind that contraband was being smuggled out in this brazen way.

"Bales of rags were a not uncommon export trade item, the rags intended for salvage, paper manufacture, and the like. So there was nothing unusual about the shipment itself.

"For three or four days the bales of rags, scattered willy-nilly toward the pier's outshore end, were left untouched. The Feds seemed in no hurry to find out what was in them besides Uncle Max's old shirts and Aunt Fanny's discarded unfashionables. I had to suppose that for the Feds the main order of business was aborting the shipment. That done, they could take their own sweet time about confirming their suspicions.

"Still, on sailing day, I had been called in for a tête-à-tête with my commissioner. He informed me of the Federal government's keen interest in the left-behind cargo. A special representative—his choice of words—would be coming around. I was to give that gentleman my fullest cooperation and was not to discuss the matter with anyone.

"'Why?' I asked, trying to keep a straight face.

"'Never mind why,' the commissioner, a bluff, ruddy-faced

man named Turner, snapped.

"After the *Dardanella* sailed, a city watchman took over from the Four Continents man. I tallied the total weight of the bales from the figures on the tags, and entered the tonnage figure in my wharfage book. At ten cents per ton per day, the charge to Four Continents was trifling, and they would pass the charge along to the shipper anyhow. As I said, the bales remained untouched for three or four days. No one seemed much interested, although the watchman told me a couple of sharp-eyed young fellows in street clothes did come nosing around.

"Then one night, around seven thirty, my wife called me to the phone. 'Business, Pat.' From the face she made I knew in a general way what was coming. She was used to my getting pulled away from home at all hours of the night. The emergency could be almost anything—a sinking vessel, a major fire, an oil spill, an explosion, a prohibited tie-up, drag racing on the marginal street, a whale washed up on the beach.

"This time it was a fire, at Pier 383. I grabbed the subway and twenty minutes later was on the scene. The fire was going pretty good but seemed to be confined to the inner end. Smoke was billowing from underneath the deck. Between the smoke, blown about by a gusty wind out of the south, and the over-

cast sky, visibility was poor. Two fireboats, one on each side of the pier, were working near the pier's inner end. Firemen were chopping through the deck timbers to get at the below-deck flames. Engine companies were working from the street side, their hoses hooked to the Siamese standpipes and run into the pier.

"Through the wide open front door I could see down the piershed interior. Through the darkness—they'd turned off the pier's electricity—and the thick smoke I could barely make out a hilo—a forklift—running back and forth, hustling the cumbersome bales onto two scows. Another man, using a flashlight, was helping the hiloman find his way among the bales. I'd watched, on sailing day, the bales being hoisted onto the ship from the scows alongside. The light scows—unloaded, no freight on them—were then shifted to the north side of the pier, toward the outer end. I had them in my wharfage book, Ambrose Scow Company's 188 and 136, at the standard charge of two dollars a day.

"A tug—I assumed it was a tug—had evidently brought the hilo, the hilo operator, and his helper, for the specific purpose of getting the bales out of harm's way off the pier. I kept out from underfoot, sticking to the street, moving around, trying for a better view. Licks of yellow

flame curled along the deck, growing from underneath. Coils of thick black smoke twisted this way and that in the fitful, changing wind. At times the smoke got so thick it completely masked the activity inside the pier and the slip between Pier 383 and Pier 384, the next pier up. The fire department laddies kept everyone off the pier except their own folks and the guys with the hilo. There was a lot of noise: shouted orders; the chatter from the radios; the sound of the pumps; the splash of the water from the hoses; and the chunk of axes biting into the stubborn, heavy deck timbers.

"I finally settled on the bulkhead midway between Piers 383 and 384 as the best vantage point. Numerous other onlookers had already collected there. A couple of T-shirted teenage boys were sitting their bikes, the bikes straddling stretched hoses, the front wheels against the backing log. The boys were exclaiming nonstop about the fire. A portly, bald-headed, elderly man, late sixties, had one foot planted atop the backing log near the boys. He was chomping a cigar and seemed to be enjoying the spectacle. Another tall, slender man was standing between two parked cars some distance from the water's edge. He had a full head of gray hair and a mustache. He was immaculately dressed, his

suit dark. From time to time he let his gaze wander over the spectators, taking in the entire scene. A couple of rather swarthy, stocky-men materialized beside me and then took up positions in the gallery up near Pier 384. They smiled, waved their arms, nudged one another excitedly, and exchanged remarks in a harsh, guttural language I couldn't place, mixed in with heavily accented English phrases. Frankly, I was a little suspicious of them. They seemed too interested, too pleased. From their looks, I thought they might be Vemarians.

"Another fire engine rolled up just as a heavy cloud of dirty gray smoke went twisting like a tornado funnel across the inner end of the slip. Smoke spilled out over the street. The driver of the fire truck evidently didn't see me, and I had to jump hastily out of the way. My jump put me beside the slender man.

"That was a close one. He almost ran me down,' I remarked. 'Guess he didn't see me through the smokescreen.'

"I startled him. He glanced quickly toward me, his look guarded. He grunted and nodded noncommittally. He didn't quite run from me but promptly turned and walked a few yards away to a spot alongside the front end of one of the fire trucks.

"By now land equipment was strung out all along the bulk-

head. Hoses were hooked up to every available hydrant and standpipe, including those outside Pier 384. One fireboat had its nose snugged at an angle against the inner end of the north side of Pier 383. So positioned, it blocked from view most of the exterior of the north side of the pier. But from where I was, I could pick out the tugboat at work, shifting first the rag-loaded inner scow, the Ambrose 136, and then the outer scow, the 188, across the slip. The movement was from the north side of Pier 383 to the south side of Pier 384.

"Out beyond the end of the pier I caught one hurried look at a deck scow with a tug outside it, apparently river traffic that in passing by-had slowed for a close-up look at the fire. The tow almost seemed to be pinned across the outer end of the slip. Then a swirl of water-hugging smoke choked off my view entirely. By the time it thinned, what met my eye was the 136, swinging broadside across the slip, just hanging there on one line. Evidently, hastily tied up, it had slipped a line. Because of the bales piled on the deck I couldn't see beyond the scow. After a short time the tug plowed through the darkness, returning to nudge the 136 tight against Pier 384 and secure it properly.

"Before long the fire department had the blaze well under

control. Hardly any flames were visible, and only a few thin ropes of smoke. The land company firemen, clomping around in their boots, were rolling up their hoses, getting ready to go home. The tug scooted off into the night, taking the hilo and the two men along. So when Evans made his entrance, the excitement was about over. He came flying out of a fast-moving government car that braked to a screeching stop near the pier entrance.

"I started toward him at once. One look and I knew he was the man I'd been alerted to expect, as surely as if he wore a flashing neon sign, FEDERAL BIGGY, draped across his chest. The kids were drawn to him, too, bouncing their bikes over the spaghetti of hose on the street. The portly old man and most of the other onlookers joined in the parade. But the slender man went striding off upriver, in the opposite direction, and the two swarthy gentlemen stayed put in the shadows up near Pier 384.

"'Who's handling things here?' Evans' voice boomed as if from a bullhorn.

"'I'm Captain McCurdy.' The grizzled fireman planted his bulky body in Evans' path. McCurdy was no graduate of afternoon teas, either. 'Who the devil are you? I hope you're not intending to go for a little stroll on the pier, because you're not.'

"'Never mind who I am, and don't tell me where I can and can't go,' Evans barked. 'Just do as I say. I'm in charge here. No one is to touch those bales.'

"'McCurdy didn't budge.

"'Let's see some credentials before you start popping off,' he said. 'By rights, I ought to run you in.'

"'Captain,' I took McCurdy by the arm, 'could I have a word with you?' To Evans I said, 'Excuse me, sir, I think I can straighten this out.'

"'Who in blazes are you?' Evans glared at me. 'Who asked you to butt in?'

"'Dockmaster O'Hara, Department of Marine and Aviation.' I showed my badge.

"'O'Hara, eh.' He hardly glanced at the badge. 'Badges mean nothing to me, O'Hara.' His eyes gave me a good going over. 'Department of Marine and Aviation, hey? What're you doing here this time of night when you should be home in bed? Building up some overtime? How about some credentials.'

"'This is one of our piers.' I fished out my little green ID card, bearing my photo and signed by the commissioner. 'You must be the special agent from Washington that Commissioner Turner told me to be on the lookout for. I thought I'd explain to McCurdy that your authority overrides everyone else's who's here. He had no

way of knowing about you, and no one expected a fire.'

"That makes it different,' McCurdy said. 'How was I supposed to know? You could have identified yourself. I don't need any tenderfoot strangers wandering on the pier in the shape it's in—soaked with water, chopped full of holes, hoses lying around—and getting hurt.'

"Understood,' Evans said. 'I appreciate your concern, but I have to go where I have to go. My name is Evans, Clint Evans, and I'm here on confidential business. It was one hell of a smoky fire, wasn't it? I saw it all the way, driving over the bridge from New York.' He still didn't show credentials, but McCurdy didn't ask for them again.

"It was a smoky fire, a damn sight smokier than it had cause to be,' McCurdy frowned.

"That will keep till later,' Evans said. 'Right now, the bales are what I'm interested in. Are they intact? Anyone mess with them? Show unusual interest in them?'

"All safe and sound as a baby in a crib. Not a drop of water touched them. The fire was all up front,' McCurdy told him.

"Fine. Wonderful.' Evans said. 'Has anyone fooled with them?'

"From what I was able to see, they're unopened and undamaged,' I said. 'They were

put on scows, and the scows moved over to the next pier, out of the way.'

"Moved?' Evans' eyebrows shot up.

"A tug came in with a hilo and two men.'

"What scows? What tug? What men?' Evans was like a terrier worrying a rat. 'Who ordered them? Did you get the names? Any information? How'd they get the hilo off the tug?'

"McCurdy and I exchanged glances. His job was to fight the fire. He didn't have the answers. Neither did I. But getting the details was my baby, not McCurdy's. I could have kicked myself. Going out onto the pier would have entailed no real risk. I didn't get anything resembling a good look at the hilo operator and his helper. The tug? Not enough to identify it. A big towing company's tug—Moran, McAllister—I'd have recognized immediately by the stack markings. Suddenly it occurred to me it might not have been a tug at all, but a large workboat. Evans' question about getting the hilo off the tug was to the point. He had a right to be put out with me.

"Sorry I can't help you.' I felt like a fool because I had none of the information I should have had. 'But all they did was run the bales onto the two scows and then push the scows over to the other pier, get them out of danger. Nothing happened to

the bales, if that's what's worrying you.

"This whole damned business is worrying me,' Evans said, 'including the nincompoop way you handled it. I just hope you're right. But I can't take your word for it, I'd better check it out for myself. The scows, how did they happen to be there?'

"No mystery about that. They're the same two scows the bales came in on. They were waiting to be picked up.'

"Pretty darned convenient, wasn't it?' he said. 'I don't like it at all. Scows in place, a phantom tug, a handy hilo, a fast in and out, a convenient fire.' He shook his head.

"How else could they handle the bales without bringing in a hilo? And the scows were swung around to the north side because that was the nearest vacant spot. Strictly a routine procedure.'

"You've got routine on the brain, O'Hara. Everything's routine with you. In my business, there's nothing routine.'

"What are you getting so excited about?' McCurdy asked. 'The tug finished and left. Why should it hang around? What Pat says sounds reasonable to me.'

"The look Evans gave McCurdy would have given a polar bear frostbite.

"McCurdy, if you had the dimmest idea what this is all

about, you wouldn't be making dumb cracks like that,' Evans said.

"What's in those precious bales anyhow? Gold? Autographed pictures of Marilyn Monroe?' McCurdy was steaming.

"Take a walk. Go fight a fire.' Evans turned from McCurdy, who stomped off.

"Too bad I didn't get here a little sooner,' Evans moaned. 'You can be sure I'd have found out who was who and what was what with that tug and hilo. I just got here from Washington, and shot right over to eyeball the situation. And what do I find? The pier on fire and a bunch of amateurs hanging around with their fingers in their ears.'

"What can I do for you now?' I asked, unhappy with Evans but under orders to cooperate.

"I'd like to have a look at those two boats as soon as possible,' he said. 'No sleep for me tonight until I satisfy myself all the bales are there and in good order. Is that pier open?' He nodded toward Pier 384.

"Locked,' I answered. 'Until morning. And no watchman there to let you in. The tenant is an export packing company. But you could get out to the boats from along the string-piece, if you don't mind walking it. I've got a flashlight with me, and I'm willing to go along with you if it's that important. The

theft guard there is a joke.'

I didn't bother mentioning that the rotted stringpiece on the ancient pier was also a joke, nonexistent in many places.

"He hesitated for a moment, then said, 'Okay, O'Hara, let's hop to it.'

"At Pier 384 I took the lead, wriggling carefully past the bent and damaged theft guard. That's the shield—sheet smooth metal fastened snug on timber—up at the street end where piershed and bulkhead meet. A properly installed, undamaged theft guard affords neither handhold nor foothold for anyone attempting to get onto the stringpiece from the street. I kept the flashlight aimed downward to make sure the footing was solid as I shuffled my feet ahead.

"'Your turn,' I beckoned him on. 'I'll shine the light so you can watch where you put your feet. If you change your mind about doing it, just say so.'

"He smiled. 'I've done a hell of a lot riskier things in my day. I've been shot at, poisoned, thrown off a bridge.'

"He moved slowly and gingerly. His sheer size was no help, and he obviously hadn't had much experience threading his way along a narrow, uneven wooden walkway ten or twelve feet above deep water. But he inched his way past the theft guard and, already breathing heavily, joined me on the stringpiece.

"'This is crazy,' he said. 'A boat would have been a better idea. I'm not in shape for this.'

"I kept ahead of him, advancing two or three feet, then flashing the light back toward him, letting him catch up. He had a look of fierce concentration on his face. All in all, his performance was creditable. Walking that rotting stringpiece took a little nerve even in broad daylight.

"We reached the first scow, the faded, white-painted number 136 barely visible. Evans stepped aboard and I followed. From an inner pocket of his jacket he pulled out a sheaf of papers. As I held the flashlight where he directed, he systematically checked the bales against the notations on the documents. Each bale had a black, crayon-numbered, thick cardboard tag wired to it. The tags contained other pertinent information—weight in pounds, port of destination, various code markings. Each scow took about ten minutes to check. Everything was in order, all the bales intact and accounted for, twenty on each scow.

"'Well, that does it for tonight,' Evans shoved the papers back into his pocket. He seemed satisfied and much relieved and showed a civil side. 'Thanks, O'Hara. Your flashlight came in handy.'

"'Just in case you want that information, the scow numbers

are the same as those I recorded in my wharfage book this afternoon.'

"His face went blank, then surprised, and then took on a look part grudging respect and part suspicion. I'd evidently planted a thought in his mind that hadn't occurred to him, and along with it the notion that I was capable of thinking after all.

"We returned to Pier 383. Evans buttonholed the watchman, instructed him to keep unauthorized people off the pier. No one, but no one, was to be allowed near the scows without Evans' personal permission. The same orders were to be passed along to all watchman shifts.

"Evans also uttered a few heartfelt words to the standby engine company's commanding officer. Then without another word he drove off.

"On the subway trip home it came to me I'd been like the kid with the baseball—because of his two left feet not really wanted in the game but suffered to play because he owned the only baseball around. Only with me it wasn't the baseball but the flashlight.

"Next morning I made Pier 383 my first stop. Inspectors and engineers from my department were already surveying the damage. A dockbuilder gang was hammering waist-high barricades around the axed-open sections of the pier deck. A

prowling fire marshall was inquiring about getting a rowboat so he could inspect the substructure. Two greyhounds—lean, FBI types—were there as well, talking with the fire marshall, peering into the holes, sniffing around the bales, questioning the watchman.

"Evans showed about a half hour later, arriving on a navy truck and accompanied by three young men in dungarees. They brought a forklift, long-handled metal cutters, and long poles. Evans favored me with a fast nod that combined recognition with dismissal.

"The forklift unloaded the scows, piling the bales toward the pier's outer end. Examination of the bales began. Surprisingly, his crew didn't have X-ray or other metal detecting instruments, probably because rounding up the right equipment would have taken too long.

"They cut the baling straps very carefully. The rags were packed incredibly tightly—by a hydraulic press, I later learned. On release of the tension, the cut metal bands whipped unpredictably and dangerously about. With the snapping of the last strap, the rags positively exploded. Evans began prodding the mass of rags apart with the poles. Nothing but rags.

"'Okay, fella,' he gave a little twist of the head, 'try again.

The treasure's here somewhere. On with the hunt.'

"Curious as I was, I couldn't stay. A fast once-over through the district put me back at Pier 383 a little after one o'clock. From the quantity of rags strewn about, it was hard to estimate how many bales they'd already worked. They were down to the last strap on one. I kept some distance away. Evans, disheveled and grim, had lost his air of supreme confidence, of being in absolute control of the situation. The bale burst apart. The men poked. Nothing. Evans swiped the pole angrily at the rags, slammed it down, and started up toward the street end of the pier.

"'O'Hara,' he planted himself in front of me, 'this is very, very fishy. Maybe you've got some cockamamie explanation of how these rags got tampered with.'

"'There's no way anyone could get to them. A watchman's covered the pier every minute since the ship sailed.'

"'So what happened to the bales? They couldn't have been opened and reclosed, even with the right equipment available.'

"'And they'd never have been able to get the stuff off the pier,' I said. 'Not unseen, not in any quantity, not anything that big.'

"'What stuff?' He glared at me. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

"'What you're looking

for—the guns,' I said.

"'How the hell do you know we're looking for guns? I never said anything to you about guns.' He thought he had me, that if I knew his secret it was because I had guilty knowledge. Another wrong word and he'd have marched me off to the pokey.

"'Come off it, Evans,' I smiled.

"'Mr. Evans to you, and don't you forget that.'

"'It's common knowledge around the piers, Mr. Evans, why the bales were pulled off the ship. The whole world knows about the guns.'

"His face fell, as if I'd just read a choice quotation from the Book of Revelations.

"'Is that a fact?'

"'Don't take my word for it. Check it out yourself.'

"He stalked off.

"The work went on. They ran through five or six bales in a hurry, Evans pitching rags about with a vengeance. By then the pier deck was hip deep in rags, everything from cutting-room snippets to old overcoats. Evans looked about as friendly as a crocodile with a jawful of aching teeth. He was chasing a phantom. I knew it. He knew it. Vemaria would not limit itself to salting one or two bales. At least half the bales in the shipment had to be loaded with guns to make it worthwhile.

"Next day I didn't hit Pier

383 until noon. Only two bales remained unopened, and the pier interior looked like a laundry room after a hurricane. Evans, with unrealistic stubbornness, was playing out the string to the bitter end. I approached him.

"Someone is going to pay for this, O'Hara," he said with cold anger. "Two days and all I've got to show for it is this." He held up a toy plastic gun and hurled it savagely to plunk against the side of the piershed. "Some son of a bitch wise guy working the compressing machine dumped it in deliberately, playing games. Someone is going to squirm for this, or I'm not Clint Evans." The icy look he fixed on me might have been meant to cow me into confessing I was that someone. "The night of the fire," he demanded, "when you were standing there gawking, did you notice anyone hanging around?"

"I told him about the portly guy and the two swarthy men.

"Foreigners?"

"They were speaking a foreign language," I said.

"Foreigners!" He was excited. "Vemarians! Seeing how it was going. Of course." He paused, then said, "But that doesn't surprise me." He paused again, frowning, his brow knitting with thought, before he said, "Anyone else? Think, man."

"Well, I did notice a man standing near me for a while."

I told him about the slender, gray-haired man.

"What did he look like? Was he tall, short, fat, thin, young, old? Can you give me any details at all?"

"He was fairly tall, about my height. On the slender side. In his fifties. Well dressed, dark suit and tie. Gray mustache. Distinguished looking. Dignified. Like a professor, or a judge, or a banker."

"A banker, you say?" Evans' eyes lit up. A strange, twisted smile played about his mouth. Then: "Would you know him if you saw him again? Identify him from a picture?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. I couldn't be sure."

"A lot gets by you, O'Hara. Entirely too much. You wouldn't get very far in my business unless you trained yourself to observe a hell of a lot better."

"It was dark and smoky and I only got one close look at him before he moved away. I guess he didn't like my company."

"Naturally," he said.

"Evans and his men packed up and drove off. But he had some final words for me.

"If in your travels you hear anything, call me. Any time—next week, next month, five years from now. Or if you ever run into anyone who was there the night of the fire—the two Vemarians, the kids, the fat old man, the banker. Or if you ever remember anything

that could help. You hear? An elephant has nothing on me. I never forget. Just call this number.' He handed me a slip of paper with a New York number scrawled on it. 'Leave your name and number and I'll get back to you first chance I have.'

We'd walked a good two miles, and I was dragging. Between stops to record wharfage, to check inside piers, and to chat with folks along the way, Pat's long legs had eaten up the pavement.

"The district ends here. Are you up to hoofing it back all right?" Pat said.

"I'll manage," I said.

Pat looked across the street. The brown-suited shadow loitered beside a loading dock half a block away. Pat waved overhead, attention-getting circles toward Brown Suit. Brown Suit pretended interest in the hefting of parcels into a truck. For Brown Suit's benefit, Pat pointed back in the direction from which we'd come.

"Evans wouldn't like that young fellow to get lost," Pat said.

We began the hike back, this time without stops. Pat said, "In a way that was the end. Officially, nothing further ever developed. But I don't like to be stumped, so, privately and unofficially, I did some checking, and a lot of heavy thinking.

Finally, I doped out exactly what happened, and why."

"What about Evans, did you ever get back to him?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not, and that was pretty curious in its own right. When I thought I had the problem licked, I called Evans' number. He said he was interested in hearing my theory but not on the phone. He'd be in New York for a few days the next week, and we arranged a meeting at a little park on 24th Street. But the next day Commissioner Turner ordered me in from the field. He was hot. Stay out of the Pier 383 thing, he told me in no uncertain terms. That was history, a fire of unknown origin, and didn't concern me. He'd been informed, he told me, about my calling Evans and setting up a meeting. Washington didn't want that to happen. Keep your nose clean. You're a good dockmaster, and do a good job, but a dockmaster's job goes just so far. There are times he has to stay out of what he doesn't understand.

"I got the message. I didn't show for the meeting with Evans. I wondered how much the commissioner knew of the situation, or if he was just going along with the Washington big brass. Oddly enough, in light of Evans' avowed determination to ferret out the truth, Evans didn't call me to find out why I hadn't showed. But after a

while I sorted that out, too—and why he hadn't was part of the answer. Who knows? Maybe before this cobalt business blows over, Evans and I will have that little talk."

Pat found a pay phone, called his office. His fast pace back to Pier 197 had me puffing. We reached the pier around a quarter past four, and Pat stopped to survey the scene.

"Evans has his machinery humming," he remarked. "Wait out here while I touch base with Allen."

I noticed Pat did not go straight to Allen's upstairs office but lingered at the pier entrance for a moment to talk with the gateman, not the same man I'd observed earlier.

I joined the crowd of sharp-eyed gentlemen gathered at the bulkhead near the drums, watching a diver exploring the inshore waters. That figured. The missing drums had possibly been dumped accidentally by some hilo operator who had not reported the mishap for fear of getting himself in a jam. The same long shot reasoning applied to the dredge, hard at work alongside the ship, its huge, silver-toothed bucket spilling out a drool of evil-looking black muck each time it was hoisted out of the water. The drums could somehow have spilled, or been dumped, overboard during the unloading.

Five minutes or so later Pat

found me and filled me in. So far, a lot of motion but no results. They'd questioned the longshore gang that had unloaded the drums, the ship's officers, and the crew. Men off scene were running down the tug crews and other boatmen who'd been at the pier, and they were tracing the truck drivers who'd delivered or picked up during the critical hours. Evans didn't miss a trick. His minions had gone over the ship, top to bottom, searching for the drums or the ore, which looked like commonplace grayish stones, on the theory it could have been taken from the drums, repackaged, and buried in some out of the way corner of the ship. The ship, Pat added, was about to be shifted to the extreme end of the pier so dredge and diver could rummage in the waters where it had been berthed.

"All this must be costing a mint," I said. "Divers and dredges don't come cheap. And all that manpower. Cops, Customs, FBI, army intelligence, EAC, CIA, who knows who else."

"Maybe some outfits Evans doesn't know about himself," Pat said dryly. "Units so hush-hush only the people in them know they exist."

"Not likely a big cheese like Evans wouldn't know," I said. "He's right up there. *The* big cheese . . . What now, Pat?"

"Well," Pat answered, "those

drums came off the ship in the right numbers, and were put on the marginal street in the usual place and in the usual way. The drums aren't hidden away on the ship, and they didn't fall into the river, not without witnesses to the big splash. Raking through the river glop with divers and dredges is just a dam-fool grandstand play, Evans putting on a spectacular, letting the world know there's no limit to his powers. Someone made off with them, thinking he was grabbing a valuable prize. The question is: who took them where? We're dealing with a person, or persons, either very smart or very dumb. Very dumb is my reading. Anyone smart enough to want the stuff, and to have the connections lined up to dispose of it, would have worked a different scam."

"I get your drift," I said. "They'd have pulled a slicker stunt, like coming in with phony papers and driving off with the whole blessed shipment, or hijacking the whole load after it left the pier. If cobalt ore's what you're after, why settle for just two drums? That'd be like busting into Fort Knox and leaving with a ten dollar gold piece."

"As I see it, it boils down to someone who had a legitimate reason to be in the neighborhood of the pier, and who was fascinated by the value, or supposed value, of the drums' contents. Plus someone with the

means of making off with them unobtrusively. Something like a big truck or conveyance, equipped with a hoist or a lift. In a word, Hambrun. Their dumpster is kept on the bulkhead, right where the drums are stored."

"What do you know about this Hambrun outfit?" I said.

"I know Emil Hambrun pretty well—a feisty little guy, a former prizefighter. A shirtsleeve boss, jockeys a rig himself in a pinch. Not a big operation, but lucrative. The grapevine has it he's a front for certain powerful interests. Wheeling those oversized, top-heavy monsters is hard, dirty, dangerous work, so it's not surprising the gang he has working for him is heavier on ex-cons than Harvard types. He's always complaining to me about the trouble he has keeping help. They're a rowdy bunch, drinkers, gamblers, and dishonest if given half a chance."

"What happens to the trash?" I asked.

"It ends up on garbage scows for dumping at sea. There's no fixed schedule, but usually a full dumpster is taken out and replaced by an empty a couple of times a week, generally on Mondays and Thursdays. But that's flexible, depending on how active the pier is and the type of cargo being handled."

"More and more promising," I said.

"Hambrun's drivers are not

world famous for their big brains. They stop off at Billy's for a bite and a beer. What better place to hear talk about this and that, cobalt ore for instance, how rare the stuff is, how casually it's left unguarded. So in a dim brain a bright idea is born. A couple of drums wouldn't be missed immediately, not till the shipment was checked through for delivery. And hardly any real risk. If something goes wrong, play it dumb: the drums of ore were mixed in with drums of trash and taken by mistake. A made-to-order situation because the same kind of drums are used on the pier to hold trash. The full drums are run out into the street and placed next to the dumpster. Hambrun's man routinely empties them into the dumpster before he pulls the dumpster out. But it's not unusual for them to take drum and all, if the drum has seen better days or the waste is messy or hazardous. A perfect setup. Is it a crime if a guy makes an honest mistake? ... The idea is so hot, so appealing, the mastermind can't keep it to himself. He talks it over with another driver. The two geniuses cook up a can't-miss scheme. A timely diversion, a little fire, will guarantee the plan's success. How's that for a scenario?"

"A sure bet for Hollywood, Pat," I said.

"One of Hambrun's rigs went on fire yesterday, late afternoon, early evening, in Billy's parking lot. The driver was in Billy's. The flames and smoke caught his eye. He rushed out and bravely ran the rig over to the bulkhead to get it out of the way. The fire department put out the fire in nothing flat. By coincidence—too much of a coincidence—another Hambrun rig was about to load up the pier trash and wheel the dumpster out. Fire has many uses."

"How'd you find out about the fire?"

"Billy. I asked him if anything unusual happened yesterday, like a fire or an accident. I already had a suspicion. Remember the flaky ashes we found on the drums and along the cobblestones? And the wet spots on the pavement? The late shift gateman confirmed the fire, and that Hambrun's man had been around late for the regular trash pickup."

"How come Evans isn't onto this angle? Shouldn't we tell him?"

"Don't worry about Evans. He'll catch on, in short order. You beat him to the drums, you get a fatter fee. He gets there first, all you get is exercise and experience."

"What are we waiting for, then? Let's go see Hambrun."

Cabs were scarce in that neighborhood, but we got lucky fast.

A twenty minute run, the last stretch a quarter mile down a dirt road, took us to Hambrun's yard in an undeveloped Brooklyn backwater near Howell Basin. A little one story brick building, windows on all sides, did office duty. Behind it, backed against the basin, stood a big cinderbrick garage, a diesel pump outside it. A few rigs and odds and ends of equipment were scattered haphazardly about.

Hambrun, in a khaki undershirt that put his impressive muscles on display, got up from behind a cluttered flat-topped desk to greet us. He was not quite bald and had a face that looked as if it was familiar with fists.

Pat introduced me and then talked, telling Hambrun what our mission was and how his men might be involved. When he finished, Hambrun's juices were working.

"Those damned idiots, Pete and Frank," he exploded. "With their records, the pair of them on parole, you'd think they'd know better. Now I understand why Pete called in sick late yesterday, took the rig home with him, and the drums. He's probably working his connections to see about peddling the stuff. A big-timer, on a big deal. Or maybe by this time it's penetrated his thick skull that all he's got on his hands is a red hot white elephant. Those two

birds are masterminding themselves a trip back to jail. I give them a job, a chance to go straight, baby them, put up with their shenanigans, and what do I get for it? Trouble and expense—that stupidass Frank scorched the hell out of a brand new dumpster with that phony fire. It doesn't pay to be soft-hearted."

"Where's Frank now?" Pat asked.

"Working. He should be rolling in shortly."

"Mind if we wait?" Pat said. "Where does Pete live?"

"Not far from here," Hambrun said. "Maybe ten minutes down the road."

"Pete made the trash pickup yesterday," Pat said. "He's the one who knows where the stuff is. How about trying to get him on the phone, Emil? Tell him the Feds are hot on his heels and you know why. Tell him if he's smart he'll run the stuff over here on the double."

"Will do," Hambrun said.

"Let's hope he's home—for his sake," Pat said.

Hambrun made the call. Pete was out, his wife said, but would be back soon. Hambrun left a message for Pete: hustle over to the yard right away if he knew what was good for him.

Just as he hung up, saying, "Pete won't come right over, though; he'll phone first," a rig rumbled into the yard. A big, dark haired man, built like a

gorilla but uglier, started into the office. I edged out of his line of sight, next to the door. Frank took two lumbering steps inside. One look at Hambrun's face and he ditched the innocent act. He stopped short, caught sight of Pat and me, and about-faced, bound for the exit. I stuck out a leg, hoping a flop on his face would discourage him. At the same time Hambrun bounced up and made an end run around the desk, yelling, "Hold it, you idiot. We got to talk."

Frank only stumbled over my leg, made a fast recovery, tried to shove me out of the way. My two hundred forty pounds yielded maybe two inches. He started swinging. His first shot, a roundhouse hook to my gut, took me by surprise, knocking some of the wind out of me. A straight shot caught me high on the cheek, alongside the eye. Stars exploded inside my head. I tried to grab him around the middle, but suddenly he wasn't there. Instead he lay sprawled on the floor, his face collecting splinters and Hambrun's arms tight around his thighs. He tried to fight free, reaching around to poke at Hambrun's face. But Hambrun jammed his knee into the small of Frank's back, clamped on a headlock, and held him helpless. The big guy simply could not match the powerhouse runt in strength.

"Behave," Hambrun said.

"Damn you, behave."

"Okay. Okay. Let me up," Frank gasped. "Who are these guys? Cops?"

"Never mind who these guys are. They're not out to hurt you. So behave."

"Listen to Emil," Pat said. "Just simmer down and do what he says and you'll be all right. It's your only chance to get out of the mess you're in."

Remarkably, Frank quieted down. Pat was so calm and collected, he inspired confidence. When Pat talked, people listened respectfully—all except Evans.

I checked my face. There was a little lump and a little blood where some skin had got unraveled. I was breathing normally. Though Frank meekly sat down beside Hambrun, I dug in at the door in case he made another run for it.

"Now listen to me," Hambrun began and looked at Pat.

"Get over to Pete and collect the goods and haul it back to the pier," Pat came in as if they had rehearsed it. "Just drop the drums off with the others, very natural like. If anyone wants to know what you're doing, just say you're returning them because they were picked up accidentally by your buddy, who is sick and couldn't bring them back himself. You're doing it because he asked you to."

"You got that?" Hambrun said.

Frank nodded dumbly.

"You sure?" Hambrun said.

"You better be sure."

"I'll take them back," Frank said. "If Pete's not home, you better make sure you tell him. Otherwise he'll be sore at me, think I'm doublecrossing him."

Hambrun said, "Don't worry about that. I'll take care of Pete. Now git."

Frank shuffled out.

"Thanks for helping me out," I said to Hambrun. "He plays rough."

"My pleasure. I have to get tough with the boys once in a while. Anyone I can't handle, I don't hire."

From what I'd seen of him in action, there weren't many roughnecks who couldn't work for him.

"What now?" I asked.

"Just sit tight," Pat said. "It won't be long. Company's coming."

"Who's coming?" Hambrun asked. "The stuff's on the way. The deal's over."

"You don't know Mr. Evans. You're in for a surprise," Pat said.

"After this, nothing'll surprise me," Hambrun said.

I wasn't sure about that. I expected fireworks when Evans arrived—if he arrived. I wasn't as sure as Pat was he'd be along that fast.

Pat was right. Standing where he could watch the dirt approach road through the win-

dow, he announced, "Here he comes. Alone and in one hel-luva hurry."

Pat sat down in a chair alongside Hambrun's desk, his back to the door: I watched through the window.

In a moment the screech of brakes came out of a cloud of dust. Evans came bounding out of the government car. He burst into the office.

"Where is he?" Evans aimed his voice at Hambrun, saw Pat, and said belligerently, "You again? What's going on?"

"Where is who?" Hambrun got to his feet.

"The driver," Evans said. "You know which one."

"I got lots of drivers," Hambrun said. "Who the hell do you think you are, busting in here like this?"

"O'Hara, tell him who I am. And after that, tell me exactly what you're doing here. You're a little off your beat, aren't you, on company time?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Evans," Pat said quietly, "outside of knowing you're connected with the Federal government somehow, I don't know who you are. I happen to know you're chasing two drums of cobalt ore missing from Pier 197. If our paths keep crossing, call it coincidence. I don't go looking for you. I'm off duty now, here with my friend Phil Mandel. Sort of an unofficial observer. Anything else you want to know?"

"You bet. Where's the driver and where are the drums? The driver who picked up the trash at the pier yesterday."

"The driver I can help you with. Let's see." Hambrun rifled pages in a spiral notebook and said, "Pete Monte's your man. The drums I can't help you with. I just heard about them being missing. Phil here is looking for them, too."

"You better be telling me the truth," Evans said, ominously. "Where does Pete Monte live?"

Hambrun gave him the address and phone number. Then Evans went after Pat.

"Coincidence my foot. Observer, my other foot. O'Hara, someday you're going to get burned, playing with fire like you do."

"Now, let me tell you something, Mr. Evans." Hambrun, picking up Pat's cue, spoke the "mister" with exaggerated formality. "It's customary to identify yourself before you charge in like a bull and start bellowing all over the place. If it wasn't Emil Hambrun sitting here, you could find yourself eating a mouthful of teeth."

"A rotten idea. Don't try me," Evans said. "Where can I get hold of this Pete Monte? Right now?"

"At this exact minute? Beats me," Hambrun said.

"I need to talk with him on a Federal matter. So don't play games with me. Where is he?"

And the other guy whose truck caught fire yesterday. I know all about it."

I had to think Evans was pretty shrewd. He'd figured out the scheme just the way Pat did. But Pat had beaten him in putting the pieces together, and that stuck in Evans' craw.

"You mean Frank Baruk? He's out in the field, not in yet."

"And Pete? Is he in the field, too?"

"No," Hambrun shook his head. "He called in sick yesterday afternoon, said he was going to the doctor today. Who knows where he went afterward?"

The phone rang. Hambrun scooped it up.

"Who is this? Deucie?" He listened for a time. Then: "Stay where you are, Deucie. We'll send someone out..." He sighed as he hung up. "A breakdown. But that's the way this business goes."

Evans watched him carefully. I wondered if Evans was pondering the possibility that Deucie and Pete were one and the same.

"Something's going on here," Evans' eyes were on my face. "What the hell happened? Who slugged you?"

"Slipped in the bathtub," I said.

Evans harumphed and said, "What about you, O'Hara? How do you figure in this skit?"

"Figure in what?"

"The cobalt."

"To me, cargo on the street. No more, no less. Ten cents a ton a day, like with the rags. I'm with Phil. You know what his interest is. Phil thought Hambrun's man might have picked up the drums accidentally and invited me along while he checked. Anything wrong with that?"

"If you had any ideas, why didn't you come to me? Don't you ever learn?"

"It was just a shot in the dark. . . . Emil, can I use your phone? I forgot to tell Allen his permit for unloading kapok has been approved."

"Go ahead." Hambrun shoved the phone toward Pat.

"Allen?" Pat said after dialing. "I'm at Hambrun's. Your kapok permit is okay. In all the excitement I forgot to tell you. . . . Yes, Mr. Evans is here. Want to talk to him?"

Pat handed the phone to Evans. Evans listened. Different expressions flickered across his face.

"Okay, Allen. Thanks for calling," he said, a little mixed up. "I'll be over there soon as I can." He seemed relieved, but also angry.

"Anything important?" Pat asked innocently.

"Very important and pretty damned strange," Evans said savagely. "Allen happens to look out his window and sees one of your monkeys, Hambrun. Making a delivery to the pier. The

two drums. No explanation. Just set them down beside the others and drove straight off. Now, isn't that just a little too much? Another shot in the dark, hey, O'Hara?"

"That must have been Pete," Hambrun said. "He must have driven the rig directly home with him yesterday when he got sick. Then he felt better when he came back from the doctor today and decided to hit the dump to unload. He probably hadn't noticed the drums were on the rig until he got there. So after he unloaded, he ran the drums over to the pier."

"A likely story," Evans said. "I'll have it run down a little later. Make sure your boys are home when my men come around. Now I've got to wrap things up at the pier. O'Hara, I don't know what you've been up to, but I'll find out, I swear I'll find out, no matter how long it takes."

"Why don't you just leave it be?" Pat said. "You got what you wanted, the drums are back home. You can go take the bows."

"I got a runaround, a beautiful snow job," Evans said. "This isn't over yet."

He went out the door. Pat got up and followed him out.

"Nice going," I said to Hambrun. "That was Pete on the phone a little while ago, wasn't it? You said he'd call first before coming."

"We call him Deucie, too. You know, not an ace but a deuce."

"You better do something with your log, doctor it up before Evans' men come snooping."

"What log?" He picked up the notebook. "That's the time book. The closest thing to a log around here is the desk calendar, and I'll take care of that right now."

He ripped off and tore up the top sheets.

Pat appeared in the doorway.

"Come along, Phil. Evans is giving us a lift to the pier."

Evans, strangely silent, drove at a civilized speed. Pat finally got the talk going.

"Evans, I owe you an apology for never making it to that meeting with you, about the rags."

"If you'd showed, you'd still be waiting," Evans snorted. "I couldn't make it, either. You know how it is. Something came up in a hurry, and I was called away."

"Are you still interested in hearing about that flimflam?"

"Not particularly," Evans said.

"They pulled a switch on the bales," Pat went on anyhow.

He was riding up front with Evans, who turned and gave him a fat look.

"Tell me something I don't know. What do you take us for, a bunch of Boy Scouts? We had fourteen carat information that

guns were in some of those bales. By the time I opened the third bale, I got the picture: they'd sneaked the loaded bales away and run in substitute bales. Let me tell you something: We had that pier under constant surveillance after the ship sailed."

"That figures," Pat said.

"We were hoping some attempt would be made to recover the guns, and that would lead us to some people we were trying to smoke out. I was against waiting, but that's the way the man on top wanted it. So I was overruled. I was right, of course."

"The switch was made bale for bale, the replacement bales marked exactly the same as the pilfered ones. Picking them out was easy, from the code markings on the tags," Pat said.

"O'Hara, we studied those tag markings pretty thoroughly."

Evans was getting interested, in spite of himself.

Pat said, "From what you say about the surveillance, the switch had to be made sometime during the fire. Do you agree?"

"A schoolboy could figure that out," Evans said.

"That means," Pat said, "the switch was pulled off right under the eyes of everyone on the scene. They were tricked into believing they saw something that actually didn't happen in quite the way they thought

they saw it happen. The one and only time the observers could be taken in was at the height of the fire, when their attention was focused on the blaze. Sure, in an offhand way they were aware the bales were being moved off the pier and onto the scows—a proper and legitimate activity to safeguard the cargo. Questioning that movement never occurred to anyone except you. You were way ahead of me, especially in why you questioned it. You smelled a rat from the beginning.”

“O’Hara, if there’s a rat around, I smell a rat. If I’d been at the pier as soon as you, they’d never have gotten away with the switcheroo. I’d have found out who ordered the tug and hilo there, and why—gotten to the bottom of it. You flubbed the dub, O’Hara.”

“I had company,” Pat said. “Just remember, I had no positive knowledge there were guns in that shipment, and no reason at the time to suspect the fire was anything but an ordinary fire.”

“You were there,” Evans said, “and I wasn’t. That’s the bottom line. It all hinged on the tug and the hilomen and the smokiness of the fire.”

“Rowboats working under the pier in the middle of the night—that’s how the chemical to create the smoke was sprayed or painted on. Very little chance

of being caught. An empty pier is full of noises—timbers scraping together, wind rattling the doors and roof, the water—”

“Spare me the poetic details,” Evans broke in. “We knew all that the morning after the fire. We checked out every rowboat in the metropolitan area.” He shook his head. “Impossible to find out where they came from. Same thing with the tugboat. We investigated every tug in and around the harbor, had fifteen, twenty men on that alone. Okay. So they set the fire and came in with a tugboat and a hilo. The one thing we don’t know is how they engineered the switch.”

“There were three scows, not two.”

“A third scow, that no one saw?” Evans was derisive. “Abracadabra, now you see it, now you don’t. Come on, O’Hara. You can do better than that.”

“The only way to get the job done,” Pat said. “No one was looking for a third scow, and no more than two were ever in sight at one time. The boat that brought the hilo towed the scow, parked it temporarily across the end of Pier 384, the next pier up, out of sight from the street. Then they hoisted the hilo onto Pier 383 and went to work wrestling the bales onto the scows, using steel plates as bridges. Very thoughtfully, the hilo operator’s helper had a flashlight.”

"You never told me about a flashlight," Evans said. "How does that fit in?"

"I thought nothing of it at the time," Pat said. "It didn't seem worth mentioning."

"But now it is! You're one for the books, O'Hara."

"The hiloman's helper used the flashlight to pick out the bales with guns from the coding of the tags. I'd noticed the seemingly random way the bales were moved from the pier onto the two scows but missed its meaning. Under the circumstances, you'd expect each bale to be put aboard the scow closest to it. The fastest, most sensible way—but not the way it happened. The bales with guns went on the Ambrose 188, the outermost of the two. The inner scow, the 136, got those with just rags. The bales were split up evenly, twenty with and twenty without guns. The third scow, the one they hung temporarily at the end of Pier 384, came in with twenty bales of plain old rags, the tags suitably marked. The third scow was an Ambrose piece, its original number painted over to 188. Incidentally, Evans, if you'd taken the trouble to weigh and measure the bales before you ripped them apart, you might have found some interesting discrepancies. You flubbed the dub there."

Evans swung his head around to stare at Pat, almost dumping

us into a ditch before turning his attention back to the road. He said to Pat, "Of course. Impossible to duplicate them exactly in the time they had to work in. Not that it makes any difference now. If what you're saying is true."

"You made another mistake," Pat said. "A bad one. You know why you never located the tug?"

"Why?"

"There was no tug. You were looking for a watermelon in the apple barrel. It was a service workboat that everyone assumed was a tug."

"No tug?" Evans looked stunned.

"Didn't you say you checked all the towing outfits in the harbor and came up empty?"

"So we did."

"Then you should have looked elsewhere, the same place I looked, for a boat with a boom. You had the answer but didn't recognize it. You commented yourself that getting the hilo off a tug and onto the pier might be a tough job. Those people couldn't afford being delayed unloading the hilo. Do you still think all this is conjecture?"

"Theory," Evans said.

"Another thing, did it occur to you that the tug, or whatever, arrived on the scene with remarkable speed after the fire started? My guess is the boat was waiting close by, by prearrangement."

"We knew that," Evans said. "Then why didn't you take it one step further? Without underestimating the Vemarians, didn't it strike you as unlikely that they, acting alone, would be able to dream up and bring off such a complicated scheme without a hitch? There's no way they could have had the experience, manpower, and organization."

"What are you getting at?" Evans said darkly. I could see his hands tighten on the wheel.

"Figure it out for yourself. They had to get the stunt done before you returned to New York. They knew you'd been detailed to handle the investigation personally, and they knew when you were due to arrive. So they had to move that night. They knew your style—that you'd come right over to the pier. Their intelligence was first-rate. Didn't it bother you your absence handed them the three or four days they needed?"

"Yes, it bothered me," Evans said vehemently. Then, more quietly: "They did know a hell of a lot, almost more than you'd think possible."

"Then it's conceivable they knew about the hurry-up assignment that took you out of the country?"

"Impossible. There weren't half a dozen people in government who knew about that assignment."

"Which turned out to be a wild goose chase?"

"It was—unproductive," Evans conceded. "But a lot of them are."

"Undoubtedly," Pat said. "But my theory tells me they knew this one would be a dud. They knew everything about you, down to your shoe size."

I was wondering what Pat was driving at, and what kind of struggle between the two of them was going on beneath the surface of the conversation.

"Theory, conjecture, could-haves, might have beens, thought it wases, guesses. Bah!"

"Do you want to hear the rest of it? How they actually made the switch? You might want to know for future reference. They were pretty clever."

"Too damned clever," Evans said. "You've said enough. I can live without the rest of it."

"I'd like to hear the rest," I said. A glimmer of what Pat was up to suddenly hit me.

Evans gave me a dirty look but Pat went on.

"While watching the fire from the bulkhead, I'd caught one fast glimpse of what I thought was a scow with a tug outside it going past the slip. My mind interpreted that indistinct bulk and the shadowy silhouette of a stack and wheelhouse in a logical but mistaken way—a tow gliding past, visible for just an instant in transit. That was a wrong interpretation."

"Almost immediately afterward, the inner scow at Pier 383 went floating broadside across the slip and blocked my view of everything that lay beyond. Again I thought the natural thing: in their rush, they'd tied the scow up sloppily, on one line. Again, I was wrong.

"The next thing I could see clearly, a couple of minutes later, was the workboat—I still thought it was a tug—pushing through the smoke to nudge the dangling scow back against the pier and resecure the line. As the inner scow was pushed back into place, the other scow, the 188, came murkily into sight, outshore of the inner scow. Pretty ingenious of them, wasn't it, to use the dangling scow as a curtain to conceal the switch between the real 188 and the phony 188? How does my theory shape up now?"

"Just a theory," Evans said. "And not too original. We kicked that idea around."

"Too bad you didn't kick it far enough," Pat said. "The guy who set it up had to be a brain, don't you think?"

"A mechanic," Evans said, trying to keep his voice flat but not succeeding."

"A master mechanic," Pat said. "I have an idea it might have been someone right there at the fire. Want to hear my theory about that? Or do you already know?"

We were on the waterfront

now, the piers to our right, but still a little distance from Pier 197. Evans suddenly stepped on the gas. The car jumped forward, bouncing on the rough cobblestones while Pat and I hung on for dear life.

"I've heard about enough nonsense from you, O'Hara," Evans screamed. "Save your fairy tales for your commissioner. From now on, O'Hara, do me a favor and stay out of my hair."

In front of the pier Evans slammed on the brakes, bolted out of the car without another word to us, and trotted into the pier.

"What's eating him?" I asked.

Pat said, "He doesn't like to come out second best. He's got to be first dog, top dog. That's the burr under his hide.... Call the insurance company, give them the good news they're off the hook. Then I'll finish my story."

I called from Billy's. Over beer, Pat talked.

"A man named Pareto, a small marine contractor, chartered the third barge, the Ambrose 93, presumably to haul a load of sand. This I learned from Ambrose's dispatcher. Pareto owned a jumbo service workboat, boom-equipped and having enough horsepower to double as a tug. Pareto wasn't the type to ask a lot of nosy questions when a good paying proposition was involved. Besides, once he

knew who was behind the proposition, he had to agree to accept it; and once he agreed, he had to keep his mouth shut. He ran the workboat himself, using his nephew as his deck-hand. He didn't know the hilotman and his helper, never even got a good look at them.

"Ambrose towed the 93, light, to Pareto's. Pareto towed it to Neptune Overseas, where the substitute bales were loaded and the scow number painted over to 188. A half hour before the fire was due to start—it was already dark—the two men and the hilo went aboard the workboat, which then towed the substitute 188 and hung it along the end of Pier 384. The rest of what happened at the fire you know. Afterward, the real 188 was taken to some spot—your guess is as good as mine—where the bales were unloaded. Back at Pareto's, the scow number was changed to 93. Thus the record shows the 93 never left Pareto's that day."

"And the guns were taken from the bales and somehow shipped to Vemaria? Evans must have known that."

"That's what got him so mad to start with. Evans wanted those guns the way a scalping party wants trophies."

"Why didn't he want to hear the rest of your story?"

"He couldn't face hearing the truth from me. I was getting too close."

"Just what is the truth?"

"The Vemarians didn't engineer the switch."

"If the Vemarians didn't, who did? Who'd do something like that, including setting fire to the pier, just for their benefit?"

"Washington. Another top secret Federal group had the mission to aid Vemaria surreptitiously in its fight for independence. That included helping them get guns. Washington wasn't quite ready to support Vemaria openly. The Banker's group was so secret—"

"The Banker?" I interrupted.

"The Banker. That's actually what he was known as. Evans knew The Banker, had even worked with him—don't ask me how I know—but thought The Banker had retired. Anyhow, when I happened to use the word 'banker' to describe the slender, gray-haired man who'd been standing near me at the fire, the truth hit him like a thunderbolt. He knew The Banker had put the whole package together. Later, the clincher, he knew The Banker vetoed our meeting, at both ends, and put out the order to kill Evans' investigation. But don't sell Evans short. He was telling the truth about putting the whole picture together, except for the mechanics."

"Why's Evans so worked up now? The rag deal is ancient history. He's like a bee sucking on an artificial flower."

"For one thing, he's sore because I pointed out his mistakes. Other people make mistakes, not Evans. Evans is always right, and way ahead of the next guy. He's got an ego as wide as the state of Texas. He can't put his finger on it, but he's positive I put something over on him today."

"You did," I said.

"But what's really gnawing Evans is the thought of my knowing he's not the real big man, so important Washington won't make a move without him, which is the image he works so hard to create. The Banker is, or was, top dog. They weren't members of the same team, working toward a common purpose, but bitter rivals. Ironical, isn't it, that these undercover intelligence agencies and the people in them dislike and distrust anyone else working a different peanut stand in the same ball park. So, more like enemies than allies, they fight like dogs for money, people, status. They spy on one another, knock one another down, work at cross purposes. Sometimes the results are embarrassing. In this gun business, friend Evans got caught naked at the ball."

"The Banker's planting that plastic gun in among the rags

must really have torn him up," I said. "Now I understand why he got so uptight every time you brought up the gray-haired man at the fire. You gave him a bitter pill to swallow, but he asked for it."

"He needed taking down a peg. But give him his due. Call him what you will—egotist, zealot, super-patriot—he's still the best kind of man for the nasty, dangerous job he has. The sole purpose of his existence is to serve his country's interests. Even when he comes up a little short, I respect him."

"You have a point," I said. "I kind of like him. What's he going to do about Pete and Frank?"

"Nothing will happen to them. There's no evidence against them that will stand up."

"Those two dunderheads are lucky you were around."

"Evans won't believe them, of course, but he won't be able to prove a thing. Then he'll get busy on some pressing assignment and forget the whole thing."

"Thanks, Pat." I finished my beer and got up to go. "I didn't mean to put you to all this trouble."

"No trouble," Pat said. "All in a day's work, right in my back yard."

UNSOLVED

by C. R. Wylie, Jr.

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July issue.

As the good ship *Pleasure City* steamed out of Lake James, past the town of Bayview, and into the swiftly flowing Wolf River, which empties into the lake at the little resort town after coursing straight as an arrow through a hundred miles of enchanting wilderness, her captain surely could have found in the bright sunlight and moving shadows of the day no hint of the storm that was soon to break. But break it did, for at 12:30 Mrs. Smythe, whose wealth and position had secured to her the leadership of what social life there was among the passengers on the week's excursion, burst into the captain's quarters charging that her jewels had been stolen, and accusing the ship's steward or one of the two maids assigned to her deck. From her story and from the stories told by the three suspects the captain pieced together the following facts.

Beyond question the jewels had been stolen no more than a few hours before their loss was discovered. In attempting to be more explicit Mrs. Smythe recalled that at 10:30 the morning maid came in with coffee, which she received in bed. As the maid departed through the adjoining sitting room, she was heard rummaging among things there, and on being so charged left hurriedly without reply. This maid admitted returning to make the bed just before she went off duty at 12:00. From 12:10 to 12:20 she was seen washing and changing her clothes in the maid's dressing room. From 12:00 to 12:10 and from 12:20 to 12:30 she could offer no alibi.

The afternoon maid entered the suite promptly at 12:00 to clean. At 12:05 she was interrupted by the steward who, with the two maids, was the only person besides Mrs. Smythe who could possibly have had access to the suite. He told her to leave until he could fix some lightbulbs that needed changing. At 12:10 Mrs. Smythe suddenly returned to her rooms, found the steward apparently snooping among her belongings, and engaged in a lengthy argument with him over the matter. This lasted until 12:25 when the afternoon maid returned to continue her cleaning. At 12:30 Mrs. Smythe

missed her jewels and immediately took the matter to the captain, as related above.

Beyond the facts already listed, upon which all parties seemed independently agreed, the only other information of which the captain felt sure was that the robbery was a solo job, and that whichever of the three suspects was guilty, he or she had no accomplice on the ship. Unable to proceed further, the captain at 1:30 gave orders to return to Bayview, intending to place the matter in the hands of the local police. However, at 2:45 a lookout sighted a jar floating in the water, and on retrieving it found it to contain all the jewels. This development completely altered the situation, and when the ship docked at Bayview the captain placed not the problem but its solution in the hands of the police.

*Who was the guilty party, and how did the captain
decide the matter?*

See page 147 for the solution to the May puzzle.

Taken from 101 Puzzles in Thought and Logic by C. R. Wylie, Jr. Copyright © 1957 by Dover Publications, Inc., N. Y., N. Y.

FICTION

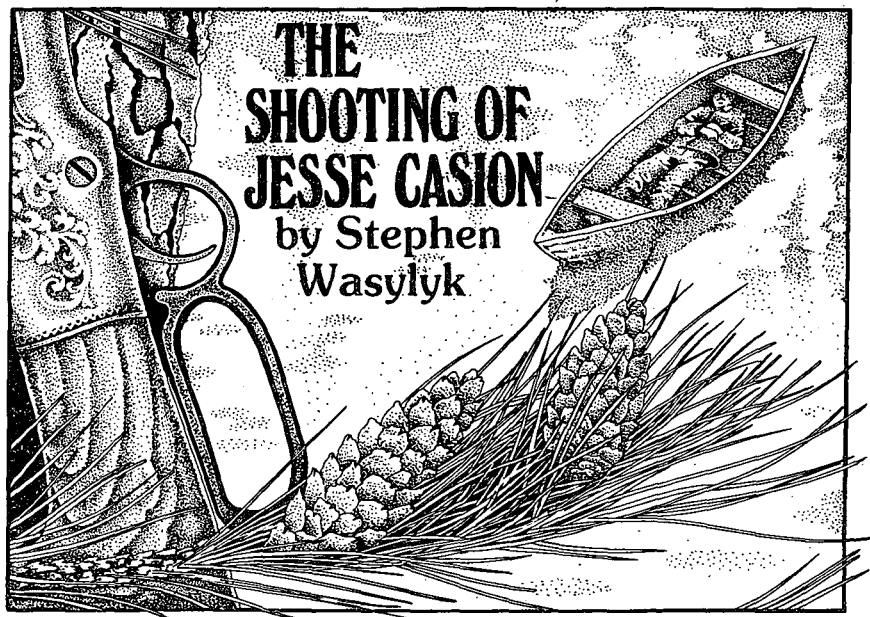


Illustration by Glenn Wolff

The once-lustrous metal of the lever action rifle on my desk was now completely encrusted by a heavy, pitted layer of rust that welded all detail into a reddish-brown mass; the once-gleaming stock was weathered to a dark, discolored walnut.

Any weapon will rust easily in the field, even in summer, the night moisture condensing readily on the metal and leaving a film by morning, but to acquire a coating as heavy as this, a rifle would have to be exposed to the elements for a long time.

I touched it with a forefinger. "Where'd you find it, Hanson?"

Hanson Poley's voice was a deep rumble. "In a tree, Gates."

The three of us stared at him, Julio stroking one end of his black mustache, Carla with her hands on her hips.

Summer had been dull for the Fox River sheriff's department. I knew something unusual had to happen eventually, but I never expected someone like Hanson to be the catalyst. He was a big, slow moving, slow speaking man who built houses that appeared to be an extension of his own solidity. There

were three things in Fox River that a north wind in January couldn't rattle—Hanson, his houses, and anything made of concrete.

Our only contact with him had been for permits to move his heavy equipment from one construction site to another over the county roads.

"In a tree?" Carla's soft voice broke the silence, the gleam of interest in her eyes making me smile.

The summer had been harder on my new deputy than on either Julio or me. She'd spent almost all of her time handing out parking tickets and giving directions to tourists, and she was beginning to question her wisdom in taking the job.

"I have a contract to build a cabin on the north shore of the lake," said Hanson. "We were clearing out a few pines when one of the men called me over." He indicated the rifle. "It was wedged into a trunk division maybe thirty feet up."

"Now who would do something like that?" Julio wasn't asking us; he was asking himself.

"Damned if I can even guess," said Hanson. "But whoever it was didn't want it found, so I figured the law was probably looking for it."

"I appreciate that," I said. "You could have thrown it into the lake and no one would have been the wiser."

He lifted a hand. "No problem. You want to see the place?"

I nodded. "I'll be out later."

Julio closed the door behind him and raised his heavy eyebrows. "Now that we have it, what do we do with it?"

"Simple," I said. "Carla will take it down to the state police lab and see what Paul London can find under all that rust."

The expressive blue eyes, that made getting a traffic citation an event for the male population, fixed on me with just a touch of rebellion. "That's a fifty mile drive. Why me?"

I grinned. "Because you've been itching to get into something interesting for some time now. But if you'd rather not, I'm sure Julio would be happy to go in your place."

She reached for the rifle. "You must be joking. This is the most exciting thing to happen around here since Garret Whitely got drunk and dived into his swimming pool after his wife had it drained." She turned the rifle over in her hands. "But I really don't see what Paul can do. The identification must have been eaten away long ago."

"For starters, I suggest he make a couple of X-rays to see if it's loaded. If it is, the gunpowder in the shells has gone through enough to make it unstable, so handle it carefully. As far as the manufacturer's name and serial numbers are concerned, I understand that

when metal is stamped, the molecules are rearranged and form a pattern. They have ways of bringing that out. Whether they will work here, I don't know. Paul will."

She nodded. "I'll call you."

"Don't rush. It was in the tree for a long time. There's no hurry now to find the reason."

Julio stood at the window and watched her drive away. "You sound as if you have no great interest in the rifle. That isn't like you."

"Think again. I could have sent you but if I had, Paul would have set the rifle aside until he got to it, which might be a week. When Carla walks in, he'll drop whatever he's doing. Haven't you noticed he has a tendency to emit smoke from his ears whenever he sees her, like a good many men around here? But if I'd hinted that, she'd have said I was trading on her femininity. She'd be right, of course, but a general I once knew said a commander must use his resources to best advantage to be successful. This way, we should have answers by the end of the day instead of stewing all week and making a half-dozen phone calls. In the meantime, I'll run out to see where Hanson found the rifle, and you can dig through the old files. Look for something that was never solved in which a rifle could have played a part."

"How far back do I go?"

"Since we have no research on how much rust accumulates on metal exposed to Fox River weather in a given length of time, your guess is as good as mine."

The man who had bought the lot where Hanson was to build the cabin had made a good choice. The lake fingered into the woods in a wide cove that contained good fishing, and the cabin would face south for plenty of sun, summer or winter. The trees, mostly pine, extended down close to the water's edge. The stump that Hanson pointed out was a good thirty yards from the shoreline.

Turning slowly, I surveyed the area. In some ways, climbing the tree and wedging the rifle into it made no sense at all. At the time it was done, there would have been nothing here except forest, as the area had started to be developed only recently. Whatever reason there had been to dispose of the rifle, it could have been done in a variety of ways far easier.

It could have been slung into the lake, for instance. The lake bottom was mud, and the rifle would have been buried in the silt. The ground was soft, so that it would have been no chore to bury it. It could have even been stripped down and the parts scattered, with the likelihood that they would never

have been found. Assuming, of course, that it had been summer. In winter, none of those options would have been open, and that might be the answer.

But wedging it high in a tree where it couldn't be seen from the ground had been clever, winter or summer. If the area was searched, and it may have been, no one would have thought of looking upward, and if they had, it would have been useless. You couldn't see very far up into these thick pines, and climbing every tree was impossible. There were too many.

I walked to the lake shore. A half mile, perhaps, to the other side, the water today slightly rippled and sparkling. A power boat drifted in the center of the cove, two men fishing from the stern.

Hanson joined me. "Nice spot, isn't it?"

"This won't be the only cabin you'll build around here," I said.

He nodded. "I guess this area is a prime example of the axiom that if you want to make money from real estate, you have to be patient. I understand that Len Casion has held this land for twenty years or more. Now it's beginning to pay off."

Far down the cove, a small jetty projected into the lake. I pointed. "Is that where he lives?"

"That belongs to Morgan Dunn. The only piece of property on the north shore that Casion doesn't own."

"How did that happen?"

Hanson shrugged. "Before my time. I've only been in Fox River for fifteen years. That makes me a newcomer."

"You have plenty of company, including me. Half the population is in the same boat."

I left him to his tree clearing. What I'd always liked about Hanson was the way he did it—cutting down only what was necessary—not like some of the other builders who leveled everything and then went back and planted a few sickly saplings to make up for it.

The gravel road he had built out to the highway was smooth, curving with the slope instead of fighting it; another indication of the way Hanson did things. Other builders would have slashed straight through so that after a year or two of erosion, the job would have to be done over. Not that they cared. They had finished and it became the problem of whoever had bought the house.

The tires of the four-wheel drive purred on the macadam of the highway as I headed back to the office. I passed the turnoff that led to the house to which the jetty I had seen belonged. Dunn. A name new to me. Julio often said he knew everyone in the county. It only seemed that way. There were too many, with more coming each year.

When I walked into the office, Julio was talking to a

young, good-looking guy in his late twenties. He was one Fox River resident I did know.

Julio jerked a thumb at him. "Macomber has a complaint."

"Feel free to speak, counselor," I said.

Macomber held up a parking ticket. "Your new-deputy gave me this. I don't think it's fair. I've been leaving my car in the alley behind my office for almost a year and have never been cited before."

"Parking has never been allowed there. You know that. The only reason you were never tagged is that Julio and I can't be everywhere. Carla now covers the places we could never get to. Park out front."

"Meters cost money."

I pointed at the ticket. "So does that."

Julio grinned. "I told you you'd get no sympathy."

Macomber grinned back at him. "To tell the truth, I don't mind the ticket. It would be worth it if I could persuade Carla to have dinner with me."

"Park there again tomorrow," I suggested. "I'll guarantee another ticket, but when it comes to the dinner, you're on your own."

After he had gone, I asked. "Find anything in the files?"

Julio handed me a manila folder. "Only this. A guy named Jesse Casion was found floating in a boat out in the lake twenty years ago. He'd been killed with

a 30-30. No witnesses. The chief suspect was a man named Dunn. Matthew Dunn. The sheriff at the time pulled ballistics tests on the rifles Dunn owned, but none matched so there was no evidence. It's all in there, including the slug."

Casion and Dunn. The names Hanson Poley had mentioned.

I fingered through the sheaf of papers; dry questions and answers that told me nothing and the slug was now useless. The rifle at the state police lab would never be fired again.

"Any doubt that the rifle Hanson brought in was the one that sheriff was looking for?" I asked.

"None, but who pulled the trigger?"

"Let's see if we can find out."

I walked down the street to the center of town to the newspaper office.

The editor, Cass Hutchins, a tall, slim man with a bald head and half spectacles on the end of his nose, came forward to the waist-high counter.

"Hello, Gates. Something I can do for you?"

"Reminisce. Dig into that newspaperman's memory and tell me about a man named Casion being shot."

"Hell, that was a long time ago. Why bring it up now?"

"Never solved, was it?"

"No one was ever brought to trial, if that's what you mean, but there was never any doubt

about who did it."

"Matthew Dunn?"

He nodded.

"I heard the name Morgan Dunn this morning."

"His wife. Matt's been dead for almost twenty years." He held up a hand. "But enough free information. I want to know why you're so interested. There's a story here and I want it."

He was entitled to know, of course. As he said, there was a story here, even if it was nothing more than the discovery of the rifle, but somehow I didn't want to tell him, not without all the facts spread before me.

"I'll make you a promise," I said. "Let me put everything together first, then sit down with you. If you want to publish it fine, but it's just possible that after all this time, it's best forgotten. Pulling skeletons out of closets is what some publications are built on. I never had that impression of your paper."

He toyed with a pencil, then nodded. "All right. As long as I make the decision, not you."

He slid behind his desk and leaned back in his chair.

"Twenty years ago, I was the reporter, the editor, the make-up man and sometimes the delivery boy for the paper, and trying to come up with the money to buy it from Harry Walters, who wanted to retire and move to Florida, so I was in on the thing from the beginning. One sunny afternoon,

much like this one, a couple of fishermen noticed a boat that appeared to be empty, drifting on the lake. When they pulled alongside, they found Jesse Casion lying in the bottom."

"Was this at the cove at the north side of the lake?"

He nodded. "Casion was a hard man, one of those driving types to whom a deal was no deal if it was fair. He always had to take home more than the other guy."

"We still have a few of those," I said. "They don't win any popularity contests."

"He would make the ones we have today look like philanthropists. Remember, back in those days the county was just getting off the ground. It had always been a nice place to spend a summer vacation, but by then people were beginning to have more leisure time and the money to pay for it. Summer homes were becoming fashionable, and the ski areas were being built. Good land, particularly bordering the lake, was very valuable as a no-risk investment. All you had to do was sit on it, and eventually you'd be able to name your own price."

"The way it is now at the north shore," I said.

"Its turn was bound to come. All that acreage was once owned by the Dunns. It had been in the family ever since the first Dunn had arrived in Fox River

and staked it out. You didn't have to be a genius to know that someday it would be worth a bundle. Jesse Casion wasn't the only speculator who wanted it, and it was general knowledge that the Dunns would never sell. But Jesse had been dealing with old county land records for a long time, and he knew that with holdings like the Dunn tract, passed on for quite a few generations, the titles had sometimes become a little fuzzy."

I nodded. "I've heard of a few of those."

"Jesse found what he was looking for in the records from the thirties. A county lien against the property for non-payment of taxes had never been satisfied, and the county had taken it over and put it up for sheriff's sale, which was useless. It was the height of the Depression and if Matt Dunn's father had no money, neither did anyone else. You couldn't give land away at that time, so the tract remained county property. Hell, it happened so often they finally gave up and let everybody slide into arrears. Whether what happened then was the fault of the county or of Matt Dunn's father was never made clear, but the lien was never paid off and legally the Dunns never regained possession. All Matt's father did was to resume paying taxes some years later, like dozens of other

people, only theirs had never been taken over. Even though the property no longer belonged to him, the county accepted the money, probably because it's against bureaucratic by-laws to return money to a taxpayer once they get their hands on it."

"And Casion paid off the lien."

"It had to be done with the collusion of someone in the tax office so that the Dunns would know nothing about it until the papers were signed. Nothing was ever proved, but the county tax collector conveniently retired and moved south within six months. Anyway, Casion then owned the land, and he'd acquired it for a song, taxes being what they were in the thirties. The Dunns not only lost the property but also the taxes they'd been paying on it. You may or may not know this, but paying the taxes on a property doesn't make it yours."

"I assume they took it to court."

"Fought it for two years and lost every step of the way. Morally it was wrong. Legally there was nothing that could be done. It was the family's responsibility to know the status of that tract, and the county had no legal obligation to inform them of anything. Let that be a lesson if you ever buy property."

"So that's why everyone believed Dunn had killed Casion."

"Aside from robbing him of

his inheritance and leaving him a poor man instead of a wealthy one, Dunn always swore that the shock of what Casion had done caused his father's death. He swore he would kill him, so when Jesse was found dead, the sheriff went after him. Couldn't prove a thing because there were no witnesses. The only evidence was the slug recovered from the body."

"Which was why the sheriff ran ballistics tests on Dunn's rifles."

"He had a half-dozen, but none had fired that bullet. He was a crack shot. Used to travel around the country competing in shooting matches, which was another reason why everyone believed he had done it. Hitting a man in a rowboat out in the middle of a lake wouldn't have been easy. Maybe it was just as well he was never brought to trial. I don't know if any jury would have convicted him. Personally, I always thought he killed the wrong man. I'd have shot the tax collector, myself."

"So it all faded away."

Hutchins shrugged. "Doesn't everything? At any rate, the property was inherited by Len Casion, who stands to become even richer than he is. Now I've told my story. Let me hear yours."

I rose. "Not yet."

"Hey, you're not going to renege on our deal, are you?"

"No. But I can't tell you until

my end of it is complete."

I walked back to the sheriff's office. Dunn had a good reason to shoot Jesse Casion, but that didn't make him the killer. A man like Casion would have made more than one enemy, and someone could have set Dunn up as a patsy, knowing the sheriff wasn't going to look much beyond a man with a motive who was a crack shot.

Julio's curiosity got the best of him the moment I walked in. "What did you find out?"

I told him what Hutchins had told me.

"So this guy Dunn got away with murder," he said.

"Maybe, or maybe he was just the handiest suspect. After twenty years, who can tell? Let's see what Carla has to say when she gets back."

She returned empty handed. I hadn't been wrong when I said that, for her, Paul would put aside whatever he was working on, only I hadn't known about the one thing he couldn't put aside. That was a court appearance as an expert witness. She'd tracked him down at the trial, and he promised he'd check the rifle that evening and have the results for her in the morning.

She listened intently to what Cass Hutchins had told me.

"It seems to me the sheriff at the time could have done more," she said.

I shook my head. "That isn't fair. You weren't there, and

from the records, he didn't have much to work with."

Julio chuckled. "Maybe he sympathized with Dunn. We don't know that either."

"I can't say that wouldn't be possible," I said slowly. "There are times when the decisions of a small town sheriff would horrify big city police departments."

"There shouldn't be any room for decisions," said Carla. "The law is the law."

"If that was all that counted, we wouldn't have so damned many lawyers."

"Are we going to drop it?"

I shook my head. "We can't do that. A murder is a murder, no matter how old it is. Now that Hanson has found the rifle, we have to take it as far as we can."

"But you said that Dunn is dead."

"Doesn't matter. The file is still open. Our job is to close it."

By noon the following day, she was back with the rifle in one hand and a manila envelope in the other, both of which she placed on my desk.

Her voice carried disappointment. "I might have known this would be a waste of time. All Paul could do was make the X-rays to see if it was loaded. It isn't. As far as any sort of identification is concerned, he said that finding it even ten years

ago probably wouldn't have helped. The rust is too deep."

I could sympathize with her. The rifle had intrigued her from the beginning, and she'd been hoping we'd pick up enough information to keep going. Now it seemed we had run into a wall as blank as the one the former sheriff had encountered.

I picked up the rifle and turned it over in my hands as if I could see something Paul London couldn't, but the corrosion was so thick that all detail had been blended together and obscured.

Carla watched me for a moment, muttered "damn," slid the X-rays out of the envelope, taped them to the window pane and stood peering at the film, hands on hips.

She wasn't ready to go back to handing out parking tickets yet.

I put the rifle down and stood behind her, studying them over her shoulder.

Paul had made a top view and one from the side. It would have taken a long time, but the rust had penetrated even into the mechanism and blurred the outlines of the various parts. If you knew what parts were supposed to be there and what they looked like, you could make a stab at identifying some of them, but that was about all. But then again, that was true of any rifle. Manufacturers spent a great deal of time and money devel-

oping ways to move a shell from the magazine to the chamber, fire it, and extract the empty casing; only a gunsmith would be acquainted with them all.

"These tell us nothing," I said. "After all this time, we have only one source of information."

"Matt Dunn is dead," she said.

"His wife, Morgan, isn't. Suppose we take the rifle and go talk to her. It's been twenty years, her husband is long gone, and she may be willing to tell us something she would have never mentioned to the sheriff during the original investigation."

She nodded. "I suppose you're right. Whatever happened back then, she's the only one who can tell us now."

I drove. Carla sat beside me cradling the rusty rifle. I was almost willing to bet we would get some sort of reaction when Morgan Dunn saw it, but I had long ago made it a point never to anticipate anything because life was full of surprises. Things never did work out the way you thought they would.

The first surprise was the woman who answered the door. She was too young to be Morgan Dunn, with a crispness, an efficiency and a pair of white, rubber soled shoes that spelled nurse in spite of the bright red blouse and slacks.

She looked at the tan uni-

forms and the badges, and I could see her trying to make a decision as she said, "Mrs. Dunn isn't well. I'm not certain I should let you see her at all. You may upset her. What did you want to talk to her about?"

"A murder. Twenty years ago," I said.

She shook her head. "I can hardly—"

"It's important," I said. "You can stay in the room. If you ask us to leave, we will. It was such a long time ago, it may not upset her at all."

"We're not here to hurt her," said Carla quietly. "All we want is answers to some questions that she may not be able to provide. Suppose you go ask her and let her make the decision."

"Wait here," said the nurse, pointing at the floor firmly.

It was the surest way to get me to move. I stepped into a room off the hall; shades of brown accented by leather chairs. A man's room. A walnut case near the door held a half-dozen rifles. Even through the glass they looked expensive, two of them with custom stocks complete with finger grips and a thumbhole, specially designed to make it easier to send a few ounces of lead over a great distance to a marker too small to be seen without a scope.

A shelf along one side of the gun case supported a collection of silver trophies. One on the other side held several smaller

ones that Carla studied intently.

The nurse returned, frowned, and beckoned us through a door to a flagstone patio overlooking the lake.

Although it was a warm day, the woman in the wheelchair had a lap robe covering her legs. Her hair was snow white, her almost transparent skin pulled taut over her facial bones. The cheekbones were high, the face strong. She really couldn't have been out of her sixties but whatever was wrong with her was causing her to waste away, and I didn't need a medical degree to know she didn't have long to live.

She nodded. "Sheriff Gates. I've heard of you, of course." She looked weak but the voice was strong and pleasant.

"Carla Donner, one of my deputies," I said.

"Ah, I like to see that." She smiled at Carla. "I would have liked to be a deputy, but that was unheard of when I was your age." She glanced at the rifle. "What is that?"

"A rifle," said Carla. "Found in a tree."

The reaction I had expected wasn't there.

"How remarkable. How do you suppose it got there?"

"We were hoping you might tell us."

"Why bring it to me?"

"We believe this is the rifle that killed Jesse Casion," I said.

She looked far across the lake and her voice was soft. "Jesse Casion. Not a very nice man."

"We understand that was your husband's opinion."

She nodded slowly. "Matt hated him. Perhaps too much."

"Enough to kill him?"

Her eyes found mine, hard and opaque. "Matt didn't kill him, no matter what they believed. Oh, I know they said that Matt was an expert marksman and had the motive and all that, but they were wrong. Matt was a target shooter. He never fired at a living thing in his life. He just couldn't. What he loved was the sport, the challenge of firing a rifle at a distant target and overcoming all the factors working against you. The rifle itself, the ammunition, the wind, the weather. And yourself. Nothing pleased him more than a tight grouping made under difficult conditions."

The nurse brought a pill in a paper cup and poured a glass of water from a carafe on a small table. Mrs. Dunn swallowed the pill and reached for the glass. Carla leaned forward and handed it to her.

"I suppose the sheriff felt the same way," I said. "At least he didn't arrest your husband."

"He had no reason." She lifted a hand and rubbed her forehead. "And even if he had, it would have been a waste of time. Matt would have never gone to trial. He had a bad

heart and was living from day to day as it was. He died three months after Casion was killed." Her voice dropped. "I was just happy that he got his wish."

"What was that?"

"After we lost the final court case, he always said he'd die happy if Casion went first."

"Did the sheriff know about his heart?"

"They knew each other." She looked up at Carla. "Do you like being a deputy?"

Carla smiled. "Very much."

A transparent hand indicated the gun on Carla's hip. "Do you shoot well?"

"Well enough. I hope I never have to."

Her head tilted back so that she could look up into Carla's eyes. "The time will come when you must. Don't hesitate."

I knelt and took her hand. It had no weight, and through the skin the bones felt thin and fragile. "Mrs. Dunn, if your husband didn't kill Jesse Casion, would you have any idea who did?"

She shook her head slowly. "I don't see that it matters after all these years. The shooting of Jesse Casion belongs to the past." Her voice was suddenly weary. "Like all of us."

The nurse jerked her head in the direction of the door.

I nodded. I thanked Mrs. Dunn, not sure that she even heard me, and Carla and I made our way through the house.

Carla said nothing until I had the four-wheel drive in motion.

"Now we know why the sheriff was so easy on Matt Dunn," she said. "He knew Dunn was going to die."

"Do you think that was wrong?"

"No, because I'm sure he also knew what I do."

"And what do you know?"

"Matt Dunn didn't kill Jesse Casion. Morgan Dunn did. She hated Casion as much as her husband, but she had a bigger motive than that. Since her husband was going to die, she wanted him to get his wish—to see Casion dead first."

"That's an interesting theory. Anything to back it up?"

Her voice was low. "You heard her say that when I must shoot, not to hesitate. That was her way of telling me. And there are those trophies next to the gun case. Some had her name on them. She was as good a shot as her husband."

"The sheriff would have known that."

"But without the rifle, he couldn't prove it."

"Neither can you."

We drove another quarter mile in silence, the road curving close to the lake shore.

Carla suddenly sat up straight and said something under her breath.

"Such an emotional expletive is hardly fashionable among

women of charming demeanor and social grace," I said mildly.

She pointed at a spot in the road ahead. "Just pull over and hand me your pocket knife."

I swung the four-wheel drive off the road and dug my knife out of my pocket. "I'm afraid to ask what this is all about."

"Good. I may end up looking foolish, so if you don't mind, please take a walk down to the lake while I do what I have to do."

I shrugged. "Okay, if that's the way you want it, but never be afraid of looking foolish. That's how I spend half my life, and I haven't lost any sleep over it yet."

"My psyche is more delicate than yours."

I walked down to the lake edge and skimmed a couple of flat stones out into the water. I wasn't there for very long before she joined me.

All she did was hold out the rifle. She had used the knife to scrape away the rust on the left side of the receiver, exposing what appeared to be a design etched into the metal, something more than a half inch wide, several inches long, and rounded at the ends, except that it wasn't a design. It had once been an opening that was now plugged with rust.

"This will justify ruining your knife blade," she said. "That's the ejection port."

Since most people are right

handed, rifles are designed to eject a spent shell away from the shooter, whether it is out the top or out the right side. That ejection pattern has always been a problem for a left-hander. If the rifle is retained on the shoulder, that shell will come flying out almost in the shooter's face. Many left-handers live with it, lowering the rifle and turning it away when ejecting the spent shell. Others settle for certain models that can be modified on special order. The only other alternatives are to have one custom made, or learn to shoot right-handed.

I doubted that there was another left-handed lever action rifle in the county.

"You have something here," I said.

"I know. I do. How many can there be? I thought I noticed the ejector on the wrong side in the X-rays, but they were so fuzzy I couldn't be sure."

I thought of Morgan Dunn drinking the water. Rubbing her forehead. Pointing. "And she's left-handed."

"That was what I remembered and why I scraped the rifle down."

I hefted it and snapped it to my shoulder. There is something about a custom weapon that never leaves it no matter how it is abused. A balance. A feeling. I hadn't noticed it before but this rifle had it, and since Matt Dunn was into cus-

tom rifles, he would certainly have had one made for his wife. I was sure that before the rust had eaten it away, the metal had been beautifully engraved, the walnut stock carefully selected and shaped; the rifle a gift for a special occasion.

And that was why she had to make sure it was never found, why she had climbed that pine and wedged it securely out of sight after she had killed Jesse Casion. Matching the slug to it would have been all a jury needed.

I handed the rifle back to Carla. "What do you want to do? Take her into custody? The gunsmith who made those rifles in the house probably made this one, too. His records will show Matt Dunn had it made for her."

"What do you want to do?"

"It's your case. You put it together. The decision is yours."

She stared out over the lake for a long time.

"She seems to be dying," she said. "She'd probably be dead before the trial."

"The law is the law. I heard someone say that recently."

The water of the lake made little lapping sounds against some small rocks embedded in the mud of the shoreline.

"You told Hanson Poley that if he had thrown the rifle into the lake, no one would have been the wiser," she said quietly.

"I do recall saying something like that."

"Well, then—"

She grasped the muzzle end of the rifle barrel with both hands and, like a hammer thrower competing for a gold medal, whirled and slung it out into the lake, the rifle spinning end over end like a boomerang until it hit the water with a loud splash.

"Let's go," she said. "Macomber is probably parked in the alley again."

I grinned. Sure, she was an attractive woman and a great many knowing looks had been thrown my way and a great many eyebrows raised this summer, and sure, the job consisted mainly of handing out parking tickets and traffic citations and giving directions to tourists, which was easy and could be handled by almost any of the people I'd passed over through the years. But there were times when something came up that was far more complex and called for someone with special qualifications, and beauty and gender had nothing to do with any of them.

The county would find that out eventually.

My only problem now was to keep Cass Hutchins from printing the story, but I was sure we'd make a deal.

As Morgan Dunn had said—the shooting of Jesse Casion belonged to the past.

FICTION

THE ESTERLUND PROGRAM

by James A. Noble

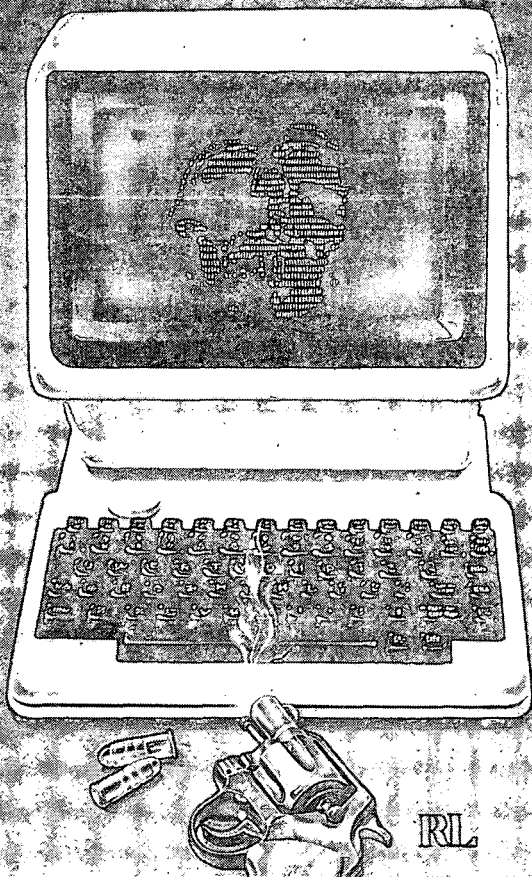


Illustration by Ray Lago

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“04: 25:56 P.M. MAY 13, 1983—ACTIVATED—ESTERLUND
MODEL 654 CRIME COMPUTER. PLEASE TYPE IN
● OPERATOR'S NAME.”

“CAPTAIN JOHN BROOKS.”

“04:25:59 P.M. CAPTAIN JOHN BROOKS ACCEPTED. PLEASE TYPE IN
PASSWORD.”

“BLUEPASS.”

“04:26:03 P.M. PASSWORD CORRECT. ENTER COMMAND.”

“ACTIVATE FILE SELECTION.”

“04:26:10 P.M. ACTIVATION ABORTED. HARDWARE PROBLEM.”

Captain Brooks slid his chair back from the display terminal he had been typing on. “So what’s wrong with the computer, genius?”

“Minor problem,” replied Bill Walters. “Someone stole the power supply out of the disc memory unit.”

“Stole? What do you mean stole?”

“Just what I said. You don’t think a power supply could disconnect itself and walk off, do you?”

“Why in the heck would anybody do that?”

Walters shrugged.

Captain Brooks sighed. “Can you fix it?”

“Of course. I’m a computer repairman, ain’t I?”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I got the Bellview murder case I want to review and analyze. I just entered some new evidence into the computer yesterday.”

“Sorry, captain. I have to order another power supply, and it’ll be tomorrow before it arrives. Now, if you could find the missing one . . .”

Captain Brooks rose angrily from his chair. He nearly bumped into a policeman who had been standing behind him.

“Who are you?” he roared at the officer.

“Officer Gary Rogers.”

Captain Brooks gave the policeman a hard stare. The policeman amended his statement.

“Officer Gary Rogers, sir.”

“What the heck are you doing in here?”

“I was just watching, sir. It’s my lunch hour.”

“Well, Officer Rogers, you must be new. This computer room is off-limits to patrolmen, so get your butt out of here . . . now.”

The policeman left without a word.

"You're a little hard on your men, aren't you?" observed Walters.

"Out on the street are killers, muggers, and thieves. I need my men and my computer working. You just see to your job as quick as you can tomorrow."

Captain Brooks went back to his office and spent the rest of the day chasing paper.

Late that night, when most of the men of the precinct had left, Officer Gary Rogers slipped into the now dimly lit computer room and connected a small black box to the disc memory unit. Then he sat down in front of the terminal and began to enter the unfamiliar commands he had seen Captain Brooks type in.

"11:45:52 P.M. MAY 13, 1983—ACTIVATED—ESTERLUND MODEL 654 CRIME COMPUTER. PLEASE TYPE IN OPERATOR'S NAME."

"OFFICER GARY ROGERS."

"11:46:09 P.M. ERROR. UNAUTHORIZED NAME. PLEASE TYPE IN OPERATOR'S NAME."

Rogers paused for a moment, then tried another entry.

"CAPTAIN JOHN BROOKS."

"11:46:46 P.M. CAPTAIN JOHN BROOKS ACCEPTED. PLEASE TYPE IN PASSWORD."

"BLUEPASS."

"11:47:01 P.M. PASSWORD CORRECT. ENTER COMMAND."

"ACTIVATE FILE SELECTION."

"11:47:22 P.M. FILE SELECTION ACTIVE. SELECTION INCLUDES SOLVED AND UNSOLVED CRIMES. ENTER COMMAND."

"SHOW UNSOLVED CRIMES."

"11:47:38 P.M. ERROR. UNRECOGNIZED CHARACTERS 'SHOW.' ENTER COMMAND."

"VIEW UNSOLVED CRIMES."

"11:47:43 P.M. ERROR. UNRECOGNIZED CHARACTERS 'VIEW.' ENTER COMMAND."

"DISPLAY UNSOLVED CRIMES."

"11:47:59 P.M. UNSOLVED CRIMES. SELECTED CRIME TYPE. ENTER COMMAND."

"MURDERS."

"11:48:07 P.M. UNSOLVED MURDERS SELECTED AND LISTED BELOW:

THE GREENWOOD GANGLAND KILLINGS

THE SHOPPING MALL SHOOTING

THE TURNPIKE SLASHER

THE BELLVIEW MURDERER

"SELECT ONE. ENTER COMMAND."

"THE BELLVIEW MURDERER."

"11:48:15 P.M. ERROR. MISSING CHARACTERS FROM COMMAND. ENTER COMMAND."

"DISPLAY THE BELLVIEW MURDERER."

"11:48:24 P.M. THE BELLVIEW MURDERER SELECTED. SEARCHING. PLEASE STAND BY . . . BELLVIEW MURDERER FILE LOCATED."

"A SERIES OF KILLINGS HAS TAKEN PLACE SINCE JANUARY 1983 THAT APPEAR TO BE RELATED. WEALTHY INDIVIDUALS ARE APPARENTLY TAKEN INTO A WOODED AREA NEAR THE BELLVIEW AREA, ROBBED, AND THEN MURDERED. SINCE ALL THE VICTIMS APPEAR TO HAVE PUT UP LITTLE RESISTANCE, IT IS BELIEVED THEIR MURDERER WAS SOMEONE WHOM THEY EITHER KNEW OR TRUSTED SUCH AS A PUBLIC OFFICIAL OR PUBLIC SERVANT. A GREAT DEAL OF EVIDENCE HAS BEEN COMPILED SO FAR."

"DO YOU WISH A DISPLAY OF THE EVIDENCE OR DO YOU WISH THE EVIDENCE ANALYZED FOR A DETERMINATION OF SUSPECTS? ENTER COMMAND."

"ANALYZE DATA."

"11:48:46 P.M. ERROR. UNRECOGNIZED CHARACTERS 'DATA.' ENTER COMMAND."

"ANALYZE EVIDENCE."

"11:48:54 P.M. THE BELLVIEW MURDERER EVIDENCE BEING ANALYZED. PLEASE STAND BY . . . ANALYSIS COMPLETE. ENTER COMMAND."

"SHOW SUSPECTS."

"11:48:59 P.M. ERROR. UNRECOGNIZED CHARACTERS 'SHOW.' ENTER COMMAND."

"DISPLAY SUSPECTS."

"11:49:08 P.M. ONE SUSPECT DETERMINED. OFFICER GARY ROGERS."

"ERASE FILE."

"11:49:21 P.M. ERROR. UNRECOGNIZED CHARACTERS 'ERASE FILE.' ENTER COMMAND."

"DESTROY FILE."

"11:49:41 P.M. ERROR. UNRECOGNIZED CHARACTERS 'FILE.' ENTER COMMAND."

"DESTROY THE BELLVIEW MURDERER."

"11:49:53 P.M. COMMAND RECEIVED. THE BELLVIEW MURDERER DESTRUCTION IN PROGRESS. PLEASE STAND BY . . ."

"CANCEL."

"11:49:59 P.M. ERROR. UNRECOGNIZED CHARACTERS 'CANCEL.' ENTER COMMAND."

"ABORT."

"11:50:09 P.M. UNRECOGNIZED CHARACTERS 'ABORT.' ENTER COMMAND."

"STOP DESTRUCTION."

"11:50:15 P.M. UNRECOGNIZED CHARACTERS 'STOP DESTRUCTION.' ENTER COMMAND."

"STO . . ."

"11:50:21 P.M. INCOMPLETE TYPE-IN. BELLVIEW MURDERER ELIMINATED. ENTER COMMAND."

"12:09:32 P.M. NO INPUT RECEIVED. ENTER COMMAND."

"12:19:32 P.M. NO INPUT RECEIVED. ENTER COMMAND."

"12:29:32 P.M. NO INPUT RECEIVED. ENTER COMMAND."

"12:39:32 P.M. TIMER RUN OUT. AUTOMATIC LOG OFF. THANK YOU FOR ALLOWING THE ESTERLUND MODEL 654 CRIME COMPUTER TO BE OF ASSISTANCE."

The following morning, Bill Walters came rushing into Captain Brooks' office.

"Don't you know to knock when you come in here?" growled the captain.

Walters appeared to be in shock. "There's a dead officer lying in front of the computer terminal."

"What?"

"That patrolman you threw out yesterday. Rogers, I believe."

Captain Brooks pressed a button on his intercom and spoke into it. "Ackerman. Get on the horn and get Doc Williams from the coroner's office up here right away." Without waiting for any acknowledgment, he headed for the computer room.

"That's not all," continued Walters trying to keep up. "The power supply is back in the disc memory unit."

When Dr. Williams arrived, he did a preliminary examination of the body.

"It appears to have been his heart," he said as two men from the coroner's office took the body away on a stretcher. "Rather surprising for such a young man, but occasionally it happens."

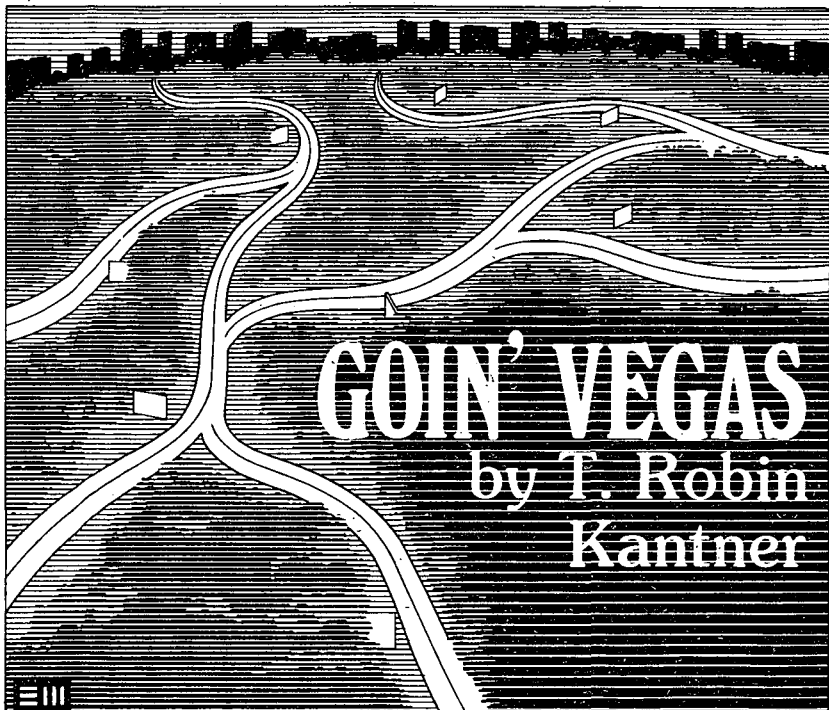
"I wonder what Rogers was up to?" said Walters to no one in particular.

Captain Brooks heard the comment and quickly sat down at the terminal. He made a few quick type-ins.

"The Bellview Murderer is gone," he said.

"You mean the file, don't you?" corrected Walters.

"Yes . . . of course. What else?"



Engraved invitations are most often to places I don't belong. This was no exception: a fancy-schmancy Bloomfield Hills swimming pool party. The raised cursive printing said, "Thank You, Eddie Anger. A Celebration." At the bottom was Fast Eddie's familiar scrawl, "Be there, buddy, I need your help."

Carole caught the invitation halfway to the wastebasket and unwadded it. "I want to go," she said, excited.

"Fine, go." I was twisted like a pretzel, lying on the floor under the kitchen sink, trying to

pry a tenant's goddam disposal loose. Water and gook dripped in my face; my head throbbed from where I'd smacked it on the edge of the counter earlier, and it was not a good time to try to talk me into anything.

Carole's voice came from above. "He's your one and only celebrity friend, and I want to meet him."

"Friend once, maybe. I haven't seen him in eight, nine years."

"I love his music."

"Lotta soft syrupy stuff. You should have heard him years ago, back when he was playing

honkytonks and high school gyms, when nobody outside of Detroit had ever heard of him."

She shifted into hard-sell, for which I believe there are entire courses of study at University of Detroit Law School. "Ben, I want to go. What the hell, it's a party. Free food and booze and Bloomfield Hills fatcats. We'll go up there and giggle a lot. And it sounds like he's got a job or something for you. You can use some dough, can't you?"

I stared up at the grinning, crippled disposal. Man, Carole sure knew where the hot buttons were; we'd been together a long time. That crack about the dough sealed it. I oonched myself out from under the sink, rose, and smacked my head on the counter edge again. Maybe doing a job for Eddie Anger would be easier than plumbing, but somehow I doubted it.

The little rat-faced creep leaned down over me. "Boss says to come see him in a few minutes. Soon as you're done sucking up his beer and hors d'oeuvres, that is."

Carole stiffened, but I stayed loose and easy, enjoying my mental picture of this L.A. hustler's head being run over by a truck. "Roger, wilco."

The little California creep slunk away into the crowd. Carole and I sat next to each other in lawn chairs, sipping drinks.

The opulent back yard was jammed with leisure suits, swimsuits, neck chains, permed hair, tinted lenses, coke spoons, and noise. The diving board thudded regularly; heavily chlorinated water whooshed up in the air. One of Eddie's recent records, a smash hit, boomed from omnidirectional speakers scattered around the large fenced yard. Aside from the gofer, no one talked to us, but away behind us a group of obvious California bigshots were trading jokes, of which all I could hear were the punch lines. "She drops her fingernail file." *Haw* *haw* *haw*.

Eddie hadn't made an appearance yet. Carole leaned over to me and said, "Wonder why those instruments are set up over there?"

"Offhand I'd say somebody's going to play something." I smoked my cigar and swigged some beer and wished I hadn't come.

Behind us, another pregnant pause and a punch line: "Five, if you slice 'em real thin." *Haw* *haw* *haw*.

The patio doors to the mansion slid open, and Fast Eddie Anger himself stepped out, looking younger than he was and dressed like the old days in jeans, boots, and a tight, tailored, black T-shirt. He smiled and waved as partygoers spotted him and shouted greetings. I stared at him, half-smiling

despite myself. The guy was magnetic still, no doubt about it.

Carole gazed raptly at him as he threaded through the crowd toward the instruments, several other people who looked like members of his old band with him. "Oh, Ben, I think he is going to play something!"

The jokers behind us had cast hard, appraising eyes on the musician and then put their heads together again. Pause, then punch line: "You can unscrew a light bulb." Haw haw haw.

Fast expertly hefted a guitar, hung it round him by its braided strap, and stepped up to the mike as the other musicians assumed their positions. "Good to be home, Detroit!" he shouted into the mike.

The crowd roared approval, all but the cold-eyed California bunch behind us, who were working on another joke. I muttered, "This is Bloomfield Hills, Fast."

Carole shushed me, leaning forward eagerly. Behind us, the pregnant pause, then: "I usually have bacon and eggs." Haw haw haw!

The canned music shut down, and the crowd quieted. Fast Eddie, smiling, said, "As you might have heard, me and the old backup band have come to an artistic parting of the ways. But today we're back together to do a few tunes for you."

He bent to his guitar, the neck went up, and he hit some hot licks that crashed into "45 Auto," one of his earliest hits from the mid-sixties. The backup band, consisting of a lead guitar, bass, drums, and two female vocalists, sounded as fresh and alive as ever. As if Fast Eddie hadn't split from the musicians who'd helped him reach the top, in favor of soulless, bought-and-paid-for session musicians. As if he hadn't finally landed a big recording contract and cut a couple of limp, gooey blockbuster albums. As if he hadn't quietly slipped away from his lifelong home in Detroit to live in Lotus Land. As if he hadn't started—as he'd once put it contemptuously—goin' Vegas.

I leaned forward, captivated. I hardly sensed Carole beside me. The crowd was silent, attuned to the music. From "45 Auto" the band rolled smoothly into "Downriver Blues," another early Anger hit and a particular Detroit favorite. Then, without waiting for applause, the band began a song I hadn't heard Eddie do in years, "Leaving Out of Here."

It was masterfully done. Toward the end, though, the emotion of the occasion finally got to the members of the backup band. The two female singers flanked Eddie close, singing the final chorus with him in close harmony, bodies moving in time

with his, and I saw tears glistening in one of the women's eyes. The other held her microphone close to her mouth and seemed unable to look at Eddie. The drummer's throat worked soundlessly as he bent forward, working the skins.

They finished the song, the crowd roared. Fast let his guitar dangle, raised his arms with his fists clenched in a victory salute, and made a smart bow. Then without looking at the band he disengaged himself from his guitar and moved through the crowd toward the back of the house. I stood and gestured to Carole and we set an interception course. But not before I heard among the cheering and noise a pregnant pause behind me and a punch line: "You can't mend a flake." Haw haw HAW!

Fast Eddie Anger sat behind the enormous, perfectly clean mahogany desk in the mansion's book-lined study. I sat facing him, half sunk in an uncomfortable high-backed stuffed chair; Carole reclined to my left in cool blonde Lady Diana splendor, and the rat-faced creep buzzed twitching to my right on an adrenalin high. Fast said, "Good of you to come, bro."

"Nice performance, Fast," I said, meaning it. I'm a sucker for professionally performed live music.

The creep said in his peculiarly New Yorkish California accent, "C'mon, Perkins, we're trying to get away from that 'Fast Eddie' shtick."

"I'm slow and stupid," I said. "I've known him as Fast Eddie since we were six. Too late to change now." I asked Fast, who was grinning rakishly, "Who is this creep, anyhow?"

Carole said in a soft, placating voice, "Ben."

Fast Eddie said, "Edmunds. P.R. man for the record company."

Edmunds jerked his head in Carole's direction. "We sure don't need *huh* here."

I retorted, "We sure don't need *you* here."

"Well," Fast Eddie said, taking charge with an abrupt nod, "we're all here and we're staying, so let's get down to business."

"Fine," I said, fishing out a short cork-tipped cigar and lighting it with the flare of a kitchen match struck on my heel. "I've sucked up enough beer and hors d'oeuvres for one day, thanks."

Eddie gave Edmunds a cold stare, then looked at me, his thin, unaged face softening. "We been out of touch a long time, Benjy, but I'm still a Detroit boy, I keep up with the old neighborhood. Somebody told me you're into investigations now."

"Strictly a sideline," I said

flatly. "I'm an apartment maintenance guy. You know, cleaning up messes, fixing broken stuff, putting things back the way they were."

Edmunds snorted. Through the smoke of my cigar, I watched Eddie's face closely. We stared at each other a long moment. Then he said quietly, "I think you just defined investigating work."

I smiled inside but didn't change expression, just shrugged. "You're the creative guy, I'm a plain working lug."

"All right," Eddie said. He leaned back in the big chair and propped his blue Adidas on the edge of the desk, hands clasped back of his medium shag, eyes on me. "I got a problem, and I need somebody I can trust to check it out."

"Two fifty per day plus expenses," I replied.

Fast Eddie nodded toward Edmunds. "He takes care of the money part. Send him a bill."

Edmunds sneered, "And this has to stay quiet, too, Perkins. No first-person articles for no damned tabloid."

Carole stirred in her chair and straightened, the trial lawyer in her aroused. "Mr. Perkins," she said to Edmunds directly, "once defied a federal grand jury and refused to disclose information, even after they gave him immunity and threatened to jail him for contempt if he didn't talk."

Fast Eddie smiled warmly at her and said smoothly, "I heard about all that. And Benjy and I go back a long ways. And for this I need a good hard street man, not some gold-medaled bell-bottomed Sunset Strip tap dancer, like the joker you wanted to hire." Edmunds shut up, which must have been a real struggle. Eddie said to me, "It's a paternity thing. Woman down in Cincinnati. Claims I got her pregnant, she's due next spring. Sent me a couple letters. Wants money, big money. Or she does her own P.R., and lawsuits, and the whole mess."

I stared soundlessly at him, momentarily elsewhere. Cincinnati. It had been a very long time. I was due for another visit. Edmunds' sibilant voice brought me back to Planet Earth.

"See," he said, gold bracelet jangling as he gestured, "man in Eddie's position, he's vulnerable to this kinda thing. Sharpshootin' chicks looking for a fast buck."

I asked, because it was expected, "What do you want me to do?"

Three pairs of eyes on me, Edmunds' contemptuous, Carole's narrow and searching, Eddie's veiled and distant. "Take care of it for me, Benjy," he said softly.

Carole, the eminently practical trial lawyer, suggested, "You could just pay her off and

write it off to cost of doing business."

"That would be goin' Vegas," Eddie answered, giving her his innocent, magnetic smile.

I nodded slowly, thinking about Cincinnati. Fast Eddie and Edmunds visibly relaxed. Eddie said to the P.R. man, "Give him your card. And the letters she sent me." The creep reluctantly pulled a wad of papers out and handed it to me. Eddie said to me, "I don't care about the dough, spend what you have to and bill me. But square it away, bro."

I put Edmunds' card in my shirt pocket and leafed quickly through the photocopies. Wendy Goodnight. Eight eighty-seven Regents Lane, Cincinnati. Well, well. It would be a pleasure to put her on the path of righteousness. To help a childhood friend from the old neighborhood. And to get to Cincinnati, on somebody else's nickel.

Carole and I left the mansion and walked along the crowded driveway toward my '71 Mustang, the noise from the party clearly audible. She said quietly, "Cincinnati, huh?"

"What about it?"

"How convenient for you."

I didn't answer. She knew nothing, and the hell with what she thought.

We got to the Mustang, and I opened the passenger side door for her. As she folded herself in, she snorted, "You didn't

even ask him straight out if he *could* have got her pregnant. Jesus!"

I climbed off the Delta DC-9 at the Cincinnati airport with a mob of early-morning, well-dressed businessmen, grabbed the first phone booth I could, dialed, and asked for Officer Lowe.

After a moment of hold, she came on. "Homicide, Terry Lowe."

"Ben Perkins, Detroit."

The silence of a slow smile. "Well, good morning. You sound close."

"Depends on your definition. I'm at the airport in your neighboring state of Kentucky."

She laughed. "Business or pleasure?"

"I'm open to pleasure, but I could use a hand with a project. How 'bout it?"

"Matter of fact, the caseload is light right now, and I'm owed a day of R and R. Fire away."

"An address. Eight eighty-seven Regents Lane, Cincinnati. How do I get there?"

"That's up on Telegraph Hill, by the river." She gave me instructions, which I wrote down on the back of my ticket jacket as clearly as I could. "If there's any way Cincinnati's finest can assist, by all means let me know."

I grinned. "You're the finest, all right."

"You know where to find me."

We hung up and I hoofed off up the concourse in search of a rental car.

Cincinnati's streets are laid out in a confusing cooked-spaghetti mess of one-ways, angled corners, bits of freeway, underpasses, overpasses, and abrupt dead ends, all complicated by a perverse series of hills and valleys strung along the Ohio River. I'd been there once on business—a seemingly routine inquiry that turned into a fairly ugly murder case—and, since then, for a couple of quick and very quiet weekends with my friend Terry; but I still didn't know my way around too well and each driving experience was a brand new adventure.

I found Telegraph Hill without much trouble, though. You really can't miss it. It juts up in a wood-and-rock mass just east of downtown, glowering over the river, occupied by a couple of parks and topped with a small colony of San Francisco-like row houses and narrow one-way alleys. Getting up there was no problem. Finding Regents Lane was fairly easy, too. Big problem was finding a place to park, and I ended up wedging my rented Ford Escort alongside two other cars at the end of an alley, beneath a sign that glowered; NO PARKING! THIS MEANS YOU, JACK!

I washed my hands of the car and briskly walked back to Re-

gents Lane. Eight eighty-seven was one half of a flat-roofed wood duplex that seemed to hang over the street. In the brightly sunlit, warmish mid-morning, the neighborhood was silent; apparently everyone was working or sleeping it off.

I watched the door and windows for a few minutes and saw no activity. Time to pull the knob, I thought. I had no strategy, no leverage, no nothing. Best I could do was get in there and work with it. I went to the front door, verified the name ("W. Goodnight"), and knocked.

The door eased back with a loud squeak, revealing a medium-sized, very young woman dressed in a sleeveless white sweatshirt and tight well-faded jeans. She was barefoot, blonde, a well-built looker, and apparently sleepy. "Yes?" she asked huskily.

You do this work long enough and after a while your instinct gives you the moves. Usually. With this one, the initial feedback told me nothing. Just have to move square-on, I thought. Wasn't encouraging, but then, as Woody Allen says, eighty percent of success is showing up. "Perkins from Detroit. You're Ms. Goodnight?"

"Yes." She jinked her head, tossing the sweep of blonde bangs off her forehead, rich brown eyes toneless and uninterested.

"I'd like to have a word with

you about some letters you've sent to a client of mine. Eddie Anger."

"Eddie?" Animation lit her face. "He's a nice man. I haven't seen him in a long time."

I stared at her, then asked, "Mind if I come in?"

"Oh, sure," she said casually. She turned and walked. I followed and shut the door. We entered a fairly large sitting room, well lighted from large windows on the far side that gave a stunning view of downtown Cincinnati. Bucks, I thought automatically. You don't get a view like this without bucks. And the place was expensively furnished in hip-eighties modern: long low brightly colored couches, a low mahogany table, big mirrors, brightly colored posters, numerous plants dangling from the ceiling by brightly beaded ropes, a rich shag carpet that came to your knees. Chrome lamps on ostrich necks reached like metal E.T.'s from their stands. The posters were mainly of kittens—she seemed to favor tiger-striped ones—and one big black and white of none other than Mr. Eddie Anger himself, guitar hanging from his neck, hands cupping a big microphone to his mouth, head slung back, belting it out to the crowd.

Wendy Goodnight said in that slow, sleepy voice, "You can sit down if you want. Coffee?"

"Thanks." She walked with

loose-limbed indolence into a kitchenette, came out with a big mug of hot black, and handed it to me. "You can sit down if you want," she said.

"Thanks," I said, searching her face for evidence that she knew she was repeating herself, and found none. I didn't particularly want to sit, since every couch in the room reached no more than six inches from the floor. And, upon smelling the coffee, I didn't particularly want that, either. It was apparently brewed from underbrush, old socks, and ditch water.

Wendy reclined on a bright blue couch beneath the poster of Fast Eddie. She said in that sleepy, toneless voice, "You ought to talk to Nick, too. He's helping me. He's a very nice man."

Momentarily thrown, I said, "Yeah?" I eyed her narrowly, looking for put-on. "I hope I didn't wake you up."

"Oh, no," she drawled. "I've been awake for hours."

"Mm." I was beginning to get the picture. "You said in the letters that you're pregnant. Is that true?"

"I sure am." She grinned innocently. "Like Nick says, the rabbit died."

"And you claim that Eddie Anger is the father."

"Must be. Has to be. I don't play around."

I was going into nicotine withdrawal, and needed a mo-

ment to think, so I fished out a cork-tipped cigar and lighted it. Wendy Goodnight reclined languidly across from me, utterly placid, sensuously filling her clothes. Puffing rapidly, I blew a stream of smoke and asked, "When were you with him?"

"Couple of months ago," she replied, giving her head that jink again that tossed the sweep of dark blonde hair back. "He played Riverfront. I had good tickets. I always have good tickets. I met him backstage after the show. He took me to dinner at La Normandie, and then we came here. He had a long week-end break in his tour, so we spent it here in town, and then he caught up with his band in Syracuse."

I said harshly, trying to break her pat chatter, "Just a three-day quickie, huh?"

She was unoffended. "No big thing, Mr. Perkins. At least, not until I found out I was pregnant."

"Yeah," I said knowingly. "So now you're turning the screws."

For the first time she showed real expression, but it wasn't anger or greed, it was genuine distress. "Hey, it wasn't like I did it on purpose. I wouldn't do that. He's responsible, too. I won't kill the baby, and I want him to have a father. Nick says Eddie should pay support money and accept paternity. That's not so much, is it? I don't want any trouble. I'm a nice person and

Eddie's a nice person and I like him a lot. But Nick says I shouldn't just let him off the hook."

Time for the million-dollar question. Literally. "Can you prove he's the father?"

"Blood test may tell, may not. Besides that, we took some pictures together. Nick says they'll prove he was here during the time I got pregnant."

I sat smoking, studying her silently, letting the swill in my coffee cup cool untouched. I was at the end of an alley, staring at a tall stone wall. I had come to Cincinnati expecting to find a con, a strong-arm job, a malicious greedy woman trying to cash in on the fortune of a visible and public-relations-conscious rock and roll singer. An old, old bit.

Instead I found this dense, amiable young woman whose story had the unarguable ring of truth.

Which meant that Fast Eddie Anger, my old childhood chum, was a liar. So much for not goin' Vegas.

It took me about two seconds to figure out why, if Eddie knew he'd gotten Goodnight pregnant, he sent me down here. He was counting on our childhood together and my evident awe of his celebrity status to motivate me to strong-arm her, scare her, make her shut up. Just to save him a couple of bucks and some inconvenience.

I wasn't really mad. I've been in this business a long time. In this work, clients always lie to you. Far as I was concerned, the job, such as it was, was over. I gave Wendy Goodnight a smile that wished her all the best, and was getting up when the front door banged and footsteps echoed in the hall.

Wendy glided to her feet and strolled to the hall. I stood uncertainly by the couch as a low, coarse, masculine voice in the hall said, "Damn it, Wendy, I've been looking for two days. You gotta give me some idea where this pic was taken."

Her response: "Nick, I'm sorry, I don't know, it was a wild weekend. It was a park somewhere. I..." Her voice went soft and unintelligible for a moment, then she came back into the room with a burly, swarthy stranger.

She said to me, "Mr. Perkins, this is my friend Nick."

He stood, stocky and hostile, and said, "Nick Wolfangel."

"Ben Perkins, Detroit."

Wendy Goodnight beamed at us and Wolfangel glowered at me. He was about my height—just shy of six feet—but maybe ten years younger. He was an almost perfect execution of *The Man in Black*: black hair cut long in a shoulder-length shag, close-cropped black beard, black leather coat, black corduroy pants, black T-shirt. He had the menacing presence

of a Hell's Angels chapter president with clean fingernails and a nine-to-five job. We stared at each other for a long moment, experiencing something like the shock of recognition: we were both players.

He said, "What's *your* angle?"

"Just asking around."

Wolfangel's mouth tightened. He turned to Goodnight and said in a soft, rapid voice, "You see what's happening here?"

"I think he's a nice man, Nick," she answered nervously.

"You forget about that and about talking to people and concentrate on that picture. We have to be able to prove when it was taken. *When*, Wendy. You got it?"

She nodded and smiled uncertainly. "I'll try, Nick."

He gestured peremptorily at me. "Let's go."

Wendy Goodnight smiled and gave me a little wave as I passed her, following Wolfangel. We stepped out onto the quiet street and walked along the sidewalk. I said to him, "You her boyfriend?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but no, I'm not," he said deliberately.

This was a guy who filled his space comfortably, who was used to being in charge. I decided to let him keep thinking it. "Some kind of guardian, then? She sure needs one."

"What do you mean?" he asked, voice brittle, giving me a thorough inspection.

"Come on. The light ain't reaching the top of her stairs, you know what I mean? I got the letters she sent Eddie. It's perfectly clear she didn't write them."

"I did. So what?"

"So," I said, "what we have here is a slow, sweet, stupid lady with a body any guy'd crawl over broken glass for, who gets herself knocked up allegedly by a rich singer. And we have a mysterious stranger in black who sees an opportunity to cash in for himself. Obviously she doesn't need the money."

"I'm not cashing in," he said calmly. "And you're right, she's from old money, she doesn't need the dough. It's the principle. Turn here."

We went left off the sidewalk and started down a path that ran down a steep slope. The marvelous view of Cincinnati spread out before us, quickly obscured by trees. I said acidly, "Oh, forgive me. Just a flaming altruist, huh?"

"Yeah," Wolfangel said readily. The path got steeper, narrower as we climbed down Telegraph Hill. This would have been super-expensive real estate if someone had ever figured out how to build on a forty percent grade. "This is my hill. I take care of people up here.

I've been doing it a long time. It's what I do, and everyone knows me up here.

"Now, Wendy's got dough, but you're right, she's no intellectual giant. She's sort of the family gigglehead, and they leave her alone most of the time. She's been conned by so many sharpies over the years you wouldn't believe it. Phony charities, panhandlers, anybody with a hard-luck story or a smooth sell on an 'investment' opportunity, Wendy just pours out the bucks and they're gone. I kind of look out for her. She's a nice kid, she needs the help, and it's what I do.

"Way I see it, your boy Eddie Anger is just another sharpie who closed in on Wendy. Now he's trying to weasel out of it, and he sends some private strong-arm talent down here. Should have expected it, but no harm's been done, really. You got real lucky this morning, getting in to talk to her with me not there, but your lucky streak is over. And I'm telling you right now, Mr. Perkins, to get the hell off Telegraph Hill, and out of Cincinnati, and tell your client, or whatever he is, to come across or he won't know what hit him."

I'll tell you, it was enough to make my heart melt: poor little rich girl without the brains to find her way out of a sentence, and the big man in black playing protector. What I especially

couldn't believe was that Wolfangel spoke with such assurance. Like he was the Godfather or somebody. Like he'd been in charge for so long that it no longer occurred to him that someone else might stand in his way. I said lightly as we puffed down the hill, "From what you said to Wendy, you can't tell when that picture of the two of them was taken."

Wolfangel said guardedly, "She says it was while he was here playing Riverfront. I believe her. Problem is, proving it. Have to nail it down."

I didn't expect it to work, but I asked anyhow. "How about giving it to me, let me check it out? I know some people."

"I told you, this is my town and my business. Butt out."

"Yeah, yeah, okay."

I thought over the options and came up with only one. Wolfangel was obviously smart and unconnable, and besides he had made me. He was younger and stronger than me and could turn me into a puddle in a fair fight—a concept he undoubtedly believed in, whereas when you've been on the street as long as I have you know there's no fair or unfair, only winners and losers. Someone said that war is the last resort of men who have run out of ideas. And I'd run out of ideas.

I pulled up next to, then slightly ahead of him, pretending that the steep grade was

pulling me along. Then I stopped and pivoted, got his right wrist with my left hand, rooted myself firmly with my right leg, and came up from my ankles with a right-handed punch that caught him in the solar plexus.

He made a *whumpf* and went limp instantly, almost knocking me down as he fell. I bent over him, pawed through the pockets of his black leather coat, and took out the picture as he whimpered and peeped and wheezed, his face gray under the beard. I said, "You'll get it back. I'm no thief." And I left him there and jogged hard back up the steep hill.

I guess I was madder at Eddie than I thought.

Elise Dahlgren bent over her cluttered desk, studying the four by five color glossy. "Can't see the name of the outdoor company. Anger is in the way."

"Looks to me like somewhere around I-71 in Fairfax," Terry Lowe commented.

"Hm. Could be. But there's a lot of bluffs and hills and valleys in the Cincinnati area. Could be a lot of places." Dahlgren went into her desk, got out a small magnifying glass, and studied the picture closer.

It was Eddie Anger, dressed in jeans and an open-necked blue shirt, standing and grinning with his arm around Wendy Goodnight, who ac-

tually had an expression on her face—smug, possessive humor. In the picture she looked like a younger, fuller-faced Tuesday Weld. They were on a bluff; in the distance was a misty valley, and on the far side, on a hill, a large billboard. About all you could tell about it was that it was dark blue with white letters; the distance and the depth of field made it unreadable.

Well, this proved they were together and knew each other, all right. But it didn't prove they were together at the time Goodnight got pregnant. About the only identifying feature in the photograph was the billboard; unless I could nail that down, the picture was of flimsy value as evidence.

I picked Terry Lowe up at Division One police headquarters and, over five-way chili at a downtown Skyline, showed her the picture and explained the situation. Intrigued, she told me that an old high school friend of hers from Western Hills was an advertising agency media supervisor and, if anybody knew the billboard business, she did.

That's how we ended up near the top floor of the Carew Tower, Cincinnati's tallest building, in Elise Dahlgren's office.

Dahlgren was tall, young, superbly dressed, a fair-skinned, permed blonde with radiant blue eyes and good Scandinavian looks. When we got to her office,

she and Terry did some old-chum gushing; Terry introduced me; and, like the professionals they were, they got down to business.

Dahlgren looked up at us, face pensive and cautious. "I can't read the copy and I don't think blowing up the shot will help, either. So you're going to have to go look for it."

Terry sighed. I asked, "So you think it might still be up?"

"Could be, if it's a permanent bulletin. Those only change copy a couple of times a year. If it's a rotating bulletin, the copy's probably changed a couple of times since. This looks to me like a thirty sheet board—pretty big—so I think it's very near a freeway. What you're going to have to do is ride the boards."

"Ride the boards?" I asked.

Dahlgren grinned. "That's what we do here when we buy outdoor for a client. You drive around and make sure everything is up where it's supposed to be. What you need to do is, drive I-71 and I-75 from the Hamilton County line south, first. If you don't find it there, do I-275. There's always I-74 west of town, too. Then you might have to cover I-75 and I-275 in northern Kentucky."

I looked at Terry, who was giving me a speculative look. "You don't mind working for your pay, do you, Ben?"

You do a lot of looking for things in my work: wives, hus-

bands, money, whatever. But when it came to billboards, I was a virgin. I said to Dahlgren, "So what if we find it?"

"All I need is the name of the outdoor company—Fenton Bros., Hardy/Sullivan, whoever. The name is usually on a small sign at the bottom. I'll make some calls and pin down when a bulletin with this color scheme was up, if it's not still there. That'll give you a date. If it matches up with when she had to've gotten pregnant, then . . ."

So we rode the boards. Cincinnati has a lot of miles of freeway, and we covered just about every one of them. The heat of the day had peaked, but the city sits in the Ohio River valley, a ready-made pocket for smothering you with heat, humidity, factory smoke. We kept the windows rolled up, the air conditioning running, and spoke little; just drove and stared out, heads swiveling like bomber pilots on the lookout for enemies.

Terry was at the wheel of her unmarked city-owned Chevrolet Malibu. Under the dashboard a heavy police radio kept up a running commentary on the real news of the day. I rode shotgun. After a while the freeways and the hills around us merged into a blur. We had several close calls, doubled back excitedly, compared the view with the picture, and drove on.

Finally we were doing I-74 west, the road to Indianapolis. It was getting toward supper, and I was tired and bored and getting hungry. Cincinnati dropped away behind us, the traffic lightened up, and we entered the sovereign state of Indiana. Terry sighed and shook her head. "Tap city, my friend."

"Listen," I said recklessly, "let's get back into town and get something to eat and relax, okay?"

She made that warm, speculative smile. "You're on." She jumped the median and we headed home. I eased my head back against the seat, seeing the road numbly. A dud, damn it. So much for getting even. Maybe the picture itself and Goodnight's testimony and ambiguous blood test results would be enough to do the job, but being able to verify when and where the picture was taken would surely have put paid to my old, old childhood friend, Mr. Eddie Anger. Well, you can't win 'em all.

We got on I-75 south, headed for downtown. I wasn't watching any more, so I almost didn't see it, up on the right, halfway up a hill.

Terry whistled and said softly, "Wowee."

I straightened in disbelief. "I thought we covered this damn road already."

"We did, but northbound, not from this way." Terry let the

car coast over to the right and well onto the shoulder. The billboard—white now, with bright red letters, an ad for Warwick Furniture—towered halfway up a wooded hill a couple of hundred yards off the freeway. I compared the picture with the view, just to make sure. No question. At the bottom was a small black sign: FENTON BROS.

Terry stopped the car, set the brake, and grabbed the mike of her police radio as I stepped out of the car onto the windy freeway shoulder. I stared at the sign as cars whipped by, and Terry's voice echoed in the car as she patched through a call to Elise Dahlgren. Then, on impulse, I set off jogging through the high weeds of the shoulder, jumped the ditch, climbed a wire fence, and fought through the trees and high brush up the slope toward the billboard.

When I returned, Terry was leaning back in her seat, waiting patiently. I got into the car, puffing with exertion. Terry said, "Bingo. It was an ad for Plains cigarettes, dark blue with white letters. Up during the month of June. That timing sound right?"

"Yeah," I said, "and I just verified it. The blue ad is still there, papered over. I peeled a part of the new one back, just to make sure."

"Probably taken up in there. There's a park there," Terry said, firing up the Malibu. As

we pulled away, she asked with a secretive smile, "Happy now?"

"Oh yeah. Better than getting paid."

"Amazing." She shook her head and smiled as she drove expertly on the crowded freeway.

The Grillan Bar sat around the corner and up the street from Wendy Goodnight's place on Telegraph Hill. I found Nick Wolfangel there the next day after leaving Terry's apartment. And finding him required no ace detective work; all I did was stop the first pedestrian I saw on Telegraph Hill and ask where to find Nick.

The Grillan Bar was a long narrow place with a big porch that hung precariously out over the crest of Telegraph Hill, giving yet another spectacular view of Cincinnati, the Ohio River, and Kentucky beyond. It was a ramshackle, cracked-vinyl, cheap-linoleum place with a dynamite juke box, a genuine pinball machine, rows of black and white pictures of obscure sporting events hanging on the walls, and a lot of street people drinking and eating greasy burgers and talking and throwing darts. My kind of place.

Wolfangel held court at a corner table by the windows with three similarly dressed goon-types. Full and empty pitchers of beer sat on the table between them. He saw me approaching

and froze, and the eyes of his friends went cold, and I swear the volume of voices in the bar dropped a good bit.

I tossed the six by nine manila envelope on the table in front of him. "I said I'd bring it back."

Wolfangel stared unblinking at me. "You're either gutsy as hell, or a damn fool."

"I found the location of the picture," I went on, trying to ignore the looks of Wolfangel's goons. "Basically, I proved it was taken around the middle of June, which was when Anger played Riverfront. It's all written up in there."

Wolfangel nodded, lips pursed in the center of his beard. "Let me ask a real foolish, naive question. You sucker punch me and grab the pic and then finish my job. Why?"

"Personal reasons. It's yours, gratis."

He chewed his lower lip, considering. "Be that as it may, I don't like being knocked around. What makes you so sure I and my friends here won't escort you outside and dribble you down the hill for a mile or two?"

I grinned. "Because I don't think you like getting hurt. Because I don't think you like seeing your friends get hurt. Because I think you're smart enough to know that what I did was business only. Because in my place you'd have done the same thing."

"Nick," one of the goons said, eyes venomous on me.

"I'm not through yet," I said sharply. "And, finally, because to succeed in the world you and I live in, you have to have friends and contacts. Guys like us need people into us, not the other way around. I helped you, but purely for my own reasons, but I also hurt you, which means I'm into you. You never know, you might need a hand in Detroit someday. Ben Perkins, operating out of Belleville, Michigan. Ask around."

I turned and headed for the door and no one followed. My hands didn't stop shaking till I had the car fired up and pointed for the airport.

Carole and I sat in the cool of the evening on the deck behind my Norwegian Wood apartment. Ford Lake, still dotted with sailboats even at this hour, spread out before us. Off to the right, the diehard duffers smacked their balls clumsily around the nine-hole golf course. I was on the phone, which was just as well, since Carole was pensive, uncommunicative, bad company as she usually was after my trips to Cincinnati.

I told Eddie Anger exactly what I'd done. I took a lot of pleasure in it. I enjoyed the long silence at the other end when I'd finished, and tried to imagine the look on Fast Eddie's

face. He said, his voice a warning rattle, "Ya *turned* on me. I'd never of figured it."

"I got mad. You conned me, you knew you got the lady pregnant and you didn't tell me. I admit I react badly to being conned, particularly by old friends. It's bad for my self-esteem. Especially from you. You haven't been able to con me since you told me I could drive a real car if I'd come over to your house and play with you. Remember?"

He wasn't listening. "You *had* that picture, and you could have made it disappear and I might have gotten free of the mess. Instead you helped 'em nail me."

"Let me put it in terms you'd understand. You weren't paying me enough to do otherwise."

"I could have!"

"No, you couldn't."

Another long transcontinental phone line hiss. "You know what, Benjy?" he asked bitterly. "I was all set to do you a real favor. You know I'm living out here now, lots of new faces around. I need a hand, somebody I can trust from the old days. Chief of security. That'd of been yours, real cake job. But not any more, pal. Not any more."

"Where's 'out here'? L.A.?"

"Vegas."

"Las Vegas?"

"Yeah. I got a steady gig at the Mandarin," he said triumphantly. "Four four-week en-

gagements a year. Weather's good, taxes great, chicks fantastic. And it's just a short hop down to L.A. Perfect. But far as I'm concerned, you can just stay in that dying rat-hole town of yours."

I honestly laughed and shook my head. "So you're goin' Vegas, huh?"

He didn't answer. I sat there and bit into my cigar and smoked, staring without seeing at the back of Carole's blonde head.

I almost thought he'd hung up, but he said briskly, "All right. Send Edmunds your bill. Maybe we'll pay it, I keep up my end. And one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"When you see Carole, tell her that belt buckle I left at her house accidentally, she can keep it. Kind of a souvenir, I don't need it back. Okay, pal?"

My eyes focused on Carole's head. I said, steadily, "Yeah. Okay, Fast." We hung up together.

Unexpectedly I felt nausea wave through me. Like I'd felt when I bent over Nick Wolfangel, gasping and writhing on the ground. Definitely not something you're supposed to feel after a victory.

It passed quickly, though. And I didn't ask Carole about Eddie, just as she hadn't asked me about Terry. If you don't like the answers, don't ask the questions.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Johnson Looked Back

by
Thomas
Burke

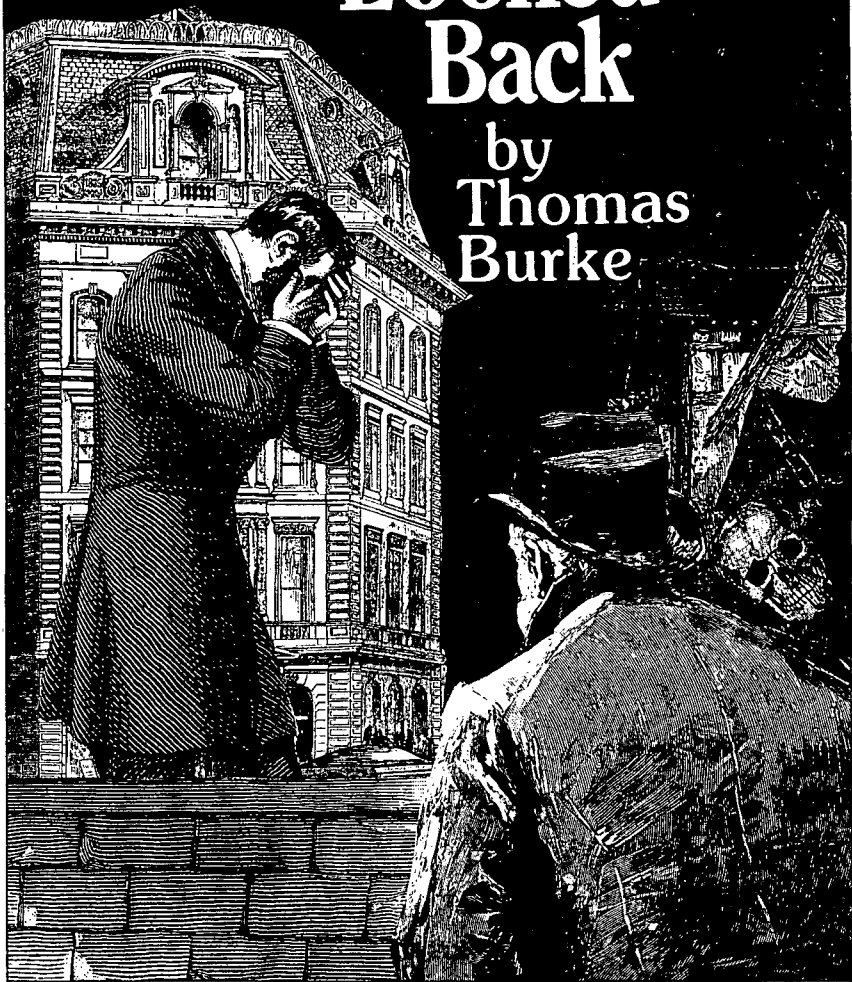


Illustration by Marc Yankus

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Don't look behind you, Johnson. There's a man following you, but don't look behind. Go on just as you are going, down that brown-foggy street where the lamps make diffuse and feeble splashers on the brown. Go straight on and don't look behind, or you might be sorry. You might see something that you'll wish you hadn't seen.

He's a blind man, Johnson, but that makes little difference to him, and is of no use to you. You can't hear the tapping of his stick because he hasn't got a stick. He can't carry a stick. He hasn't any hands. But he's been blind so long that he can walk the streets of this district without a stick. He can smell his way about, and he can feel traffic and other dangers through his skin.

You can turn and twist as you like, and use your mortal eyes as much as you like, but that man without eyes will be close on your trail. He's faster than you. He's not impeded by perception of the objects that reach you through the eyes. You are not used to the uncertain cloud of fog and blears of light; you have to pick your steps. He can march boldly, for he marches always in clear, certain darkness. If you use cunning he can meet all your cunning. Without seeing you, or hearing you, he will know just where you go, and he will be close behind you. He will know what you are going to do the moment you have decided to do it; and he will be at your heels.

No; it won't help you at all to look behind you. It will only sicken you. It's not a pleasant spectacle—this man, blind and without hands, silently and steadfastly dogging you through the curling vapor. It's much better for you not to know that you are being pursued by this creature. The result will be the same anyway; you won't escape him, and it may save you a few minutes of misery not to know what is coming.

But why is he pursuing you? Why did he wait so long at the entrance to that dim street, whose very lamps seem to be ghosts of its darkness, to pick out your step from many others, and to follow you with this wolf-stride? You will not know that until you see him face to face. You have forgotten so many things; things that the strongest effort of memory will not recall, but your pursuer hasn't. He remembers; and all these years he has been seeking you, smelling about the streets of London, knowing that some day he is certain to strike the forbidding street down which you went when you first shook him off, and that he will find you there. And tonight he has found it and has smelt your presence there, and is with you once again.

Purpose is pursuing impulse. You are idle and at ease. He is in

ferment. You are going to visit that abandoned house because it occurred to you to visit that abandoned house. He is following you because he has been waiting for nothing else. So there you go—he patient and intent; you, with free mind, picking your steps through the fog-smeared street. You have nothing to worry about. You walk through the fog with care, but with that sense of security which even the darkest streets of London cannot shake in Londoners familiar with them and with their people. You don't know what is catching up with you, and so long as you go straight ahead and don't look—

Oh, you fool! Johnson—you fool! I said—*"Don't look behind you."*

And now you've looked. And now you've seen. And now you know.

If you hadn't looked behind you would have escaped all the years of pain that are now coming upon you. It would have been all over in a few seconds. Now you've made it more dreadful. You've filled your mind with knowledge of it, and you're going to increase your torment by trying to get away. And above those two pains will come the pain of a struggle.

You won't get away. You have no chance at all. The man behind you is blind, and has no hands; but he has arms and he has feet, and he can use them. Don't think you can escape by dodging down that alley. . . . That was a silly thing to do. Alleys hold fear more firmly than open streets. Fear gets clotted in their recesses and hangs there like cobwebs. You thought you were doing something clever which would perplex him, but you won't perplex him. He is driving you where he wants you. You thought that if you could get into the alleys, and twist and turn and double along the deserted wharves, you could shake him off. But you can't. It's just in the alleys that he wants to have you, and you went there under his direction.

Already you're helping him because you're feeling the clotted fear which has been hanging in these alleys through the centuries. You're getting muddled. You lost count of the turns you've taken, and you're not sure whether you're going away from him or fleeing breast to breast upon him. You saw him in all his maimed ugliness, and you see him now in every moving heap of fog that loiters at the mouth of each new alley. Long before he is upon you, he has got you.

If you hadn't looked back, doom would have fallen upon you out of nothing. But you looked back, and now you know the source of that doom.

You might as well give up padding through the alleys. Their

universe of yellow-spotted blackness is only deluding you with hope of refuge. No corner is dark enough to hide you from eyes that live in darkness. No doors can cover you from senses as keen as air. No turn that you take will carry you farther from him; you are taking the turns he wants you to take.

There! You've turned into a little square which has no opening save that by which you entered. You're done. You can't hear him coming because he's wearing thin list slippers; but he's very near you. He's very near that entry. You've no hope of getting out. When he seizes you it would be better to yield everything, cat-like, and go with his desire and his attack. Better that than to fight. Only fools fight the invincible. But of course you *will* fight.

Hush—he's here. He's at the entry. He's in the square. You know that he's moving towards you; you know it as certainly as steel knows magnet. And then, though the fog-filled square gives you no more sight than your enemy, you know that he has halted; and you feel the silence dripping about your ears, spot by spot.

And now he has made his spring. He is upon you, and your fists fly against him. But you cannot beat him back. His blows fall upon you, and they wound and sting. You cannot fight him as you would fight another man. Your blood is cold but your brain is hot, and your nerves and muscles receive confused commands. They begin to act by themselves, automatically and without force. Your brain is preoccupied by this man.

It's no good, Johnson. Better to give in. You're only prolonging it. Your fists are useless against handless arms, or against feet. The fight is unequal. You have fists to fight with. He has none. And this lack of his puts all the advantage on his side. For a blow with the fist is painful and damaging; on the right point it may be fatal. But a blow with a stump, while equally painful and damaging, is something more. You're realizing that. It stains honest combat with something anomalous. Its impact on the face is not only a blow: it is an innuendo. It makes you think when you ought to be fighting.

And with the blows from those handless arms there are the blows from what seems to be an open hand. They tear along your face and about your neck, and each blow brings nausea. Not because it's a blow from an open hand, but because you know that this man has no hands, and because the feel of it is too long for a hand. And then you know what it is. The man with no hands is fighting you with his feet. You could put up with that if he were using feet as men do use them; if he were kicking you. What sucks the strength from your knees is that his feet are behaving like hands. You feel

as a dreamer feels when fighting the dead. You are already beaten, not by superior strength, but by blows from handless arms and from feet behaving like hands. And you know that it was your work that robbed him of his hands and left him to use his feet as hands.

And now you're down. And now one of those feet, more flexible and more full of life than any common hand, is on your neck. And the fog in this little derelict square deepens from brown to black. The foot presses and presses, very softly and very heavily; and your eyes become black fog and your mind becomes black fog. Black upon black, increasingly, until with the last rush of breath you are swallowed into a black void and a black silence and a black cessation of being.

And so, Johnson, you destroyed yourself, and because you looked back you had the full bitterness of knowing that you destroyed yourself. For this blind and maimed and ferocious creature of the velvet steps was, of course, yourself. This creature without sight and without hands was your other self, your innermost guide, whom you so constantly thwarted and denied and broke. It was you who blinded him that he might not see your deeds, and it was the things you did with *your* hands which corrupted his, until he was left with none, and at last turned upon you. And then you looked back, and you saw yourself stalking yourself to destruction; and in the last blackness of terror you understood.

Happier for you if you had not looked back, and had not understood. For then, after a sojourn in the still dusk of Devachan, you would have returned to amend a wasted life by another pilgrimage. You would have returned blind and maimed to a life of struggle and frustration, poverty and contumely and pain. And you would have called it, with a shrug, what most men call it—Luck.

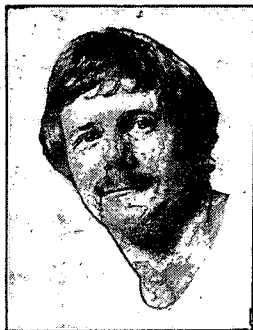
But you looked back. You are one of the few who die with full knowledge of their pursuer. So, with the blindness and mutilation, and the poverty and the pain, you will carry yet another tribulation. You will carry the tribulation of remembering *why* you are suffering.

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

Hoffman is the guilty man.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Photograph by Sid Nolas

ARTHUR LYONS

Southern California is a land of striking contrasts: lovely, high mountains studded with low, stucco, ranch-style homes; sparkling blue ocean lapping the outskirts of the second largest city in the country; majestic palms reaching for the palpable ceiling of smog, a veil that blurs the sun over the heads of the joggers and health addicts so common to the territory. One can readily see the possibilities for writers, and many mystery authors have set their books in this region. Indeed, the hard-boiled detective genre is almost indigenous to this area.

Now you must add Arthur Lyons to the list of such writers with his seven "Jacob Asch" novels, the latest (*At the Hands*

of Another) published last year. Here we have the Los Angeles that a contemporary private eye lives and works in, as described by a bright, smart-mouthed critic who obviously—despite his complaints—would never live anywhere else. Here are the inevitable comments on the weather, the glitzy lifestyle, the ubiquitous freeway snarls—all in Jake Asch's inimitable style of speech. Here, for example, in *The Dead are Discreet*, is the detective's description of his employer, a man who is overweight, jowly, and endowed with a bushy head of gray hair: "He (Paul Ellman) had the appearance of an overfed squirrel." Of course, Jake then admits to himself, this ob-

servation was made after a quart of bourbon and five hours' sleep.

Actually, Jake is more sardonic when he's cold sober and refreshed. Perhaps he has reason. When the reader meets him, he's only thirty-four years old. Yet he's already divorced, and he's spent six months in jail for contempt of court, a sentence laid on him for being a crime reporter who has refused to reveal a source for a story. To add insult to injury, Jake's paper has fired him, and he's been blackballed from working elsewhere. All that was somewhere around the age of thirty. The experience has left Jake with a slight case of claustrophobia, some hard-earned respect from a few ex-colleagues—and a new line of work, that of being a free-lance private eye. A careful reading of the books provides a few other items of interest. Jake is six feet tall, Jewish, and a Capricorn. He has a great sense of humor, he dates various women in various novels (always one at a time, though), and he has only a few good friends. He's not violent by nature, but he can put up a good fight when called upon to do so. If he's got any failing as a tough detective, it's a tendency to become too involved in a case. He is stubborn, and unwilling to let sleeping dogs lie. But Jake can be a charmer, too, and he makes an

amusing narrator/protagonist. I particularly like his habit of talking to himself, and his "Rules to Live By." An example of the latter is: "If You're Going to Chew Tobacco, Always Wear a Brown Suit." Says Asch of his Rules: "I had a million of them."

Readers should be warned that Jake's world is not a pretty one. *Castles Burning* is about a successful L.A. artist who asks Jake to track down the wife and son he'd deserted to pursue his career. Jake finds the wife, who bitterly reveals that the boy was killed years earlier in a car crash. Then the teenage stepson of the wife's second marriage disappears, and the police decide that the artist has kidnapped the boy in revenge. The final solution is much, much worse. *The Dead Are Discreet* begins when a young socialite and her pornofilmmaker boyfriend are brutally murdered, and Jake is hired by the lawyer of the accused (the woman's estranged husband) to find out who really did it. Again, the answer is very grim, and to get to it Jake has to go from gay bars to the homes of the ultra-rich, encountering everything from sado-masochism to necrophilia.

The title of *The Killing Floor* refers to an area of a meat slaughterhouse (and the site of a chilling scene). The book opens with the discovery of the decay-

ing body of a missing husband in the trunk of the man's own car. There are also *All God's Children* and *Dead Ringer*, which is about the shooting of a South American prize fighter.

The books are set against the greens and golds and blues of the California coastline, but Jake Asch's work takes him to the shadowy world that lies beneath the surface, out of sight. It's another land entirely, where greed and blackmail breed, where drugs and porno palaces abound, where sleazy bars and secret Satanic rites reign. Lyons is a powerful writer, and the violence and sex, the corruption and amorality are all there in strong doses. Yet Jake's comforting presence manages to

keep the evil in perspective. And between wisecracks, there are his own reactions to the sights he sees:

"Norton was right. The waiting was like dying. The minutes died hard, each of them going out like a mortally wounded hero in a 1930's movie, making speeches and sending messages to his lover, until you wanted to say, 'Enough already,' and drop a rock on his head just to shut him up."

Jake, you see, isn't a bad tour guide through the seamier sections of L.A.

(Holt, Rinehart, & Winston publishes Arthur Lyons in hardcover, and as Owl Books in paperback editions, priced at \$3.95 each.)

MYSTERY REVIEWS

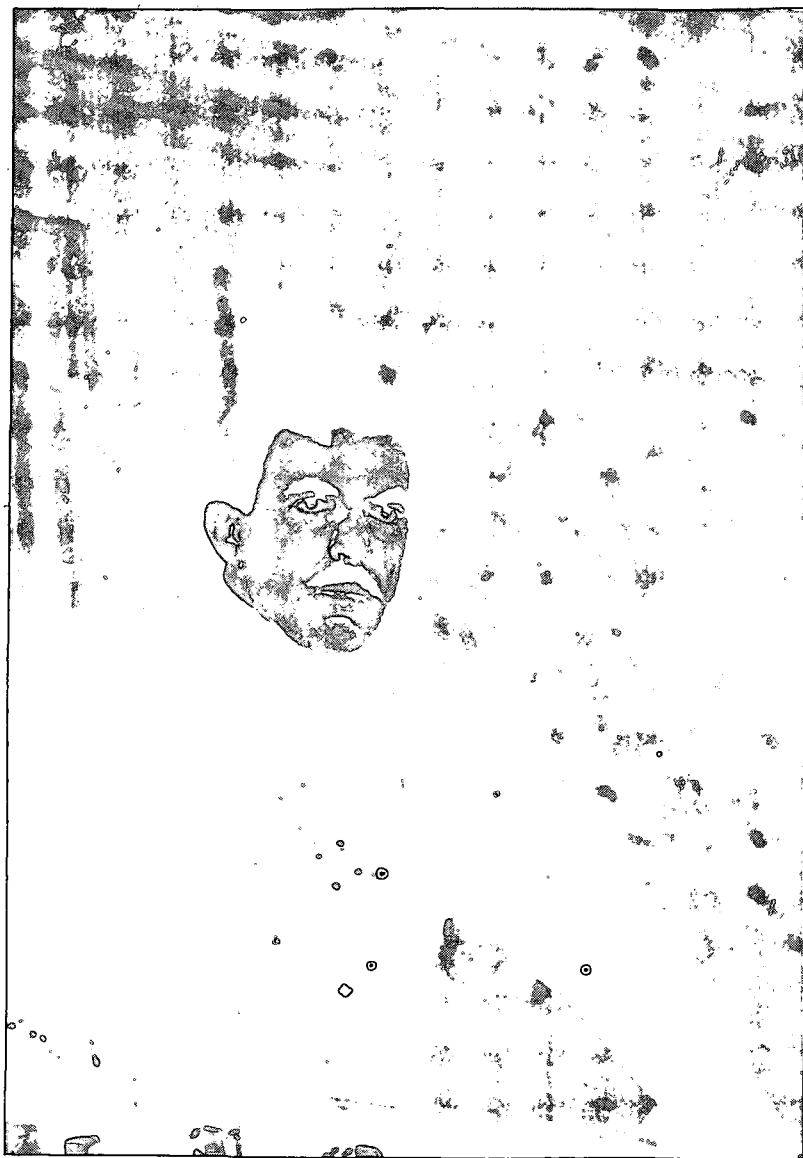
Wartime New York City is reprised in Elizabeth Daly's 1944 novel, **Arrow Pointing Nowhere**. The protagonist is Henry Gamadge, author, amateur detective, and bibliophile. A postman's puzzling tale leads Gamadge to believe that someone inside the elegant Fenway mansion is in trouble and is calling for help. Not only must Gamadge penetrate the Fenway domicile (one of impregnable respectability), but he must then locate his client among the household without arousing suspicion. The theft of a drawing from an old book and an apparent accident that kills a kindly uncle are just two of the clues that lead Gamadge to a surprising solution. Cosy and old fashioned, with a twisty plot and comfortably familiar characters. This is a Dell "Murder Ink" paperback (\$3.25, 190 pp.); Elizabeth Daly's *Night Walk* is also in print under that imprint.

J. S. Borthwick's **The Case of the Hook-Billed Kites** serves up an engaging heroine and a fresh new location simultaneously. The protagonist is Sarah Deane, graduate student from Boston, who's joining a male colleague for her first foray into birdwatching. And there you have the unusual background I promised, for the murder

and intrigue in this mystery all take place where one would least expect mayhem: the National Wildlife Refuge of Doña Clara, near the Texas-Mexico border. Sarah's involvement is immediate and personal. It is her friend who was strangled with the strap of his binoculars, and the loss of Philip brings back painful memories of an earlier grief, the death of a fiancé. But Sarah, blessed with a good brain, an abundance of common sense, and a liberal dash of pluck, agrees to stay on for her vacation to assist the police. Borthwick generally avoids the gothic ploy of endangering the heroine, and along the way the reader bumps into a number of colorful characters, and loads of information on birds and birdwatching. A sketched map of the refuge, and a cast of characters that opens the novel, promise some old fashioned entertainment. *Case* fulfills that promise admirably. (Penguin Books, \$3.50, 348 pp.)

Murder Out of Wedlock is Hugh Pentecost's thirteenth mystery to feature Julian Quist, celebrated New York public relations man. If you've never been introduced to Quist, he's suave, smart, and honest, which makes him well-liked and quite successful. This assignment he takes on somewhat unwillingly, as a favor to an old friend: talk to superstar Sharon Ladd and find out why she's messing up the Broadway show that has promised to be the season's smash. Quist talks to Sharon, but also to those close to the movie beauty: the woman's ex-husband, a paralyzed former race-car driver; a once-promising actress who is now the star's dresser; and the director and fellow actors in the Broadway show. Quist's quest quickly becomes more serious, though, when another ex-husband is shot to death in Sharon's hotel—with the actress's gun. Sharon Ladd is sympathetically drawn, and the supporting cast of characters is entertaining. This isn't a tough book about show-biz, but it is fun, and Pentecost manages to build up suspense to a surprising finale. (Dodd, Mead & Company, \$11.95, 184 pp.)

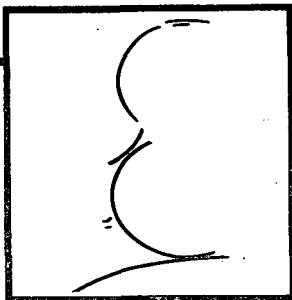
On an entirely different note is Evelyn Hervey's **The Governess** (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95, 182 pp.), set in London in 1870. There Harriet Unwin, an orphan who has pulled herself up to her first position as governess, finds herself being accused of the stabbing murder of the head of the household. Aided by a maid who shared her early days of poverty, Harriet staunchly sets about solving the crime, without the assistance of the ambitious Scotland Yard detective assigned to the case. One can wonder why it takes Harriet so long to figure out whodunit, but along the way there's lots of period ambience and a peek into the strict social strata prevailing in Victorian England.



Tom Selleck as "Lassiter" on the job as a cat burglar.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



The title character of *Lassiter* is a debonair cat burglar on the model of Cary Grant in Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief* (1955). As *Lassiter*, the impressively tall, somewhat stiffly goodlooking Tom Selleck is put on the spot by the local London police and a visiting FBI man. They know he is a crook, and they have arranged to frame him for a crime that—given his record—will send him up for twenty years to life. His only way out is to steal ten million dollars' worth of diamonds for them from the German Embassy.

It's a lot of cash and a tough job, for this is just before the outbreak of war in 1939 and the Nazis have made the place virtually impregnable. But as

the tough Scotland Yard inspector who would like to put Selleck behind bars points out, "If it was going to be easy, I'd get my missus to do it."

The situation is intriguing, and not just in technical ways. It brings to mind Humphrey Bogart's roles as the loner who is called upon to perform a dangerous but patriotic act. In *Lassiter's* case, the Nazis have stolen the diamonds to finance South American espionage. Selleck has been quoted as saying of *Lassiter's* situation that "deep down, it taps his sense of patriotism, though he'd sooner go to jail than admit it." Unlike Bogart, though, instead of making a heroic decision, *Lassiter* tries to run away. When the police catch up with him, we get a look at the *Orient Express*.

Like the other sets and costumes in the movie, this splendid interior is authentic. No glint of patriotism, however, shines forth from it. (By the way, the story of the great train that has been setting of so many mysteries is told in a new book, *Venice Simplon Orient-Express; The Return of the World's Most Celebrated Train* by Shirley Sherwood: Weidenfeld & Nicolson/Beaufort. \$19.95.)

In the absence of psychological complications, *Lassiter* turns into a straightforward heist caper. Selleck has to manipulate the sexually kinky female courier in charge of the diamonds so that she will want to take him into the embassy. Then he must slip out of her bed, locate the stones, work his way past the guards and guard dogs, elude Scotland Yard and the FBI, fence the haul, and escape with his girl (played by the alluring, Merle Oberon-like Jane Seymour).

Given Selleck's James Bond-derived insouciance, his success with the ladies, and the reassuringly lush technicolor, there is little doubt of the outcome. These days, in fact, the fate of the attractive criminal is just as certain, though changed, as in the old movies where crime

was invariably punished. As for the fate of outright villains, in *Lassiter* the female Nazi in charge of the diamonds is a torturer, uses children in sex acts, and commits murder: she ends up with a single sock on the jaw.

Moralists may well complain about the endings of modern crime movies, but there are literary objections to be raised as well. These days, so certain is the viewer in advance that crime *does* pay, it seems that the only means of keeping the plot interesting are trick reversals such as those used for comic effect in the movies *The Sting* and *The Sting II*. This means that everything turns on undependable clues and misleadingly withheld information: an unsatisfactory arrangement for anyone devoted to mystery.

Lassiter is no exception to the rule. Its hero, heroine, and pre-World War II settings are attractive, and its plot promising. But right from the opening half hour of R-rated sex scenes, *Lassiter* is a movie that cheats its audience. The fact that there is no comeuppance for criminal acts is sufficiently deplorable, but lack of respect for the rules of the crime genre itself is positively unforgivable.

THE STORY THAT WON



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The January Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by R.A. Larsen of Farmington Hills, Michigan. Honorable mentions go to Rose Lee of Bolingbrook, Illinois; K. J. Franks of Wooster, Ohio; Arthur Moore of Westlake Village, California; Floyd McWilliams of Geneva, New York; Debra Landers Codd of Winton, California; Matt DeMarco of Ventura, California; Nick Humphrey of Rochester, New York; Tom Raber of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio; Anne Scharnetzki of El Paso, Texas; Douglas Montgomery of Oldsmar, Florida; Barbara Tatom of Magnolia, Texas; John Dix of Guilford, Connecticut; and Michael Dougan of Woodland Hills, California.

TELL TALE BREATH by R. A. Larsen

Lieutenant Turner stamped his feet to keep warm. It was a bitter cold day. His officers were scouring the area as he coordinated their efforts to catch the robbers of an antique shop nearby. Witnesses had seen a man and a woman run from the scene. The police had promptly cordoned off the area and were searching all the buildings, but the suspects had somehow managed to disappear.

Officer Finley came out of the front door of Burnstine's Mannequin Shop. "God, it's cold out here," he said.

"Anybody in there?" the lieutenant asked.

"Just old Burnstine asleep on a couch. He didn't see anything, and his son is out on a delivery. His place is kind of creepy. It's filled with hundreds of lifelike mannequins on every floor."

"I know. Burnstine is an expert in making and repairing them. Stores all over the state do business with him."

"Any new orders, lieutenant?"

"No, I guess it's time to call the search off." The lieutenant took one last look at Burnstine's shop, beginning at the front door and ending at the third floor where a male and female mannequin stared back at him through the glass window. Turning towards his squad car, the lieutenant took two steps. Suddenly, he whirled around and ran towards the mannequin shop, yelling, "They're on the third floor."

"How do you know?" Officer Finley shouted as he followed several steps behind.

"Mannequins don't breathe. The two on the third floor are fogging up the window."

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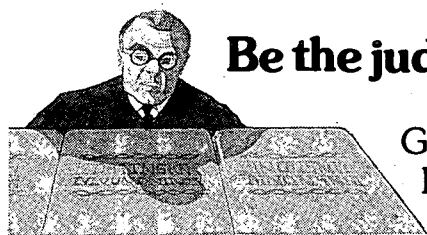
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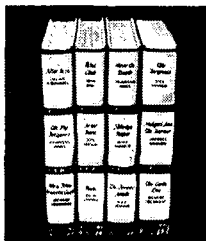
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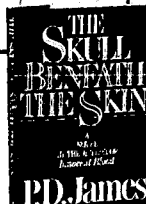
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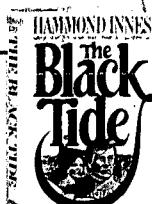
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